GIBBON PERCEVAL

FLOWER O' THE PEACH

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Gibbon P.

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Содержание

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"Flower o' the peach,
Death for us all and his own life for each."

Fra Lippo Lippi.

CHAPTER I

It was late in the afternoon when the sheep moved off, and the west was full of the sunset. They flowed out from the cactus-ringed fold like a broadening trickle of milk, with their mild idiot faces set southwards towards the sparse pastures beyond the horizon, and the dust from their feet hung over them in a haze of soft bronze. Half-way along the path between the house and the dam, Paul turned to watch their departure, dwelling with parted lips on the picture they made as they drifted forth to join themselves with earth and sky in a single mellowness of hue.

The little farmhouse with its outbuildings, and the one other house that reared its steep roof within eyeshot of the farm, were behind him as he stood; nothing interrupted the suave level of the miles stretching forth, like a sluggish sea, to the sky-line. In its sunset mood, its barren brown, the universal tint into which its poor scrub faded and was lost to the eye, was touched to warmth and softened; it was a wilderness with a soul. The tall boy, who knew it in all its aspects for a neighbor, stood gazing absorbed as the sheep came to a pause, with the lean, smooth-coated dog at their heels, and waited for the shepherd who was to drive them through the night. He was nearing seventeen years of age, and the whole of those years had been spent on the Karoo, in the native land of dreams. The glamour of it was on his face, where the soft childish curves were not yet broken into angles, and in his gaze, as his steady unconscious eyes pored on the distance, deep with foreknowledge of the coming of the night.

"Baas!"

Paul closed his lips and turned absently. The old black shepherd was eager to linger out a minute or two in talk before he went forth to his night-long solitude. He stood, a bundle of shabby clothes, with his strong old face seamed with gray lines and the corners of the eyes bunched into puckers, waiting in the hope that the young baas might be tempted into conversation. He carried a little armory of smooth, wire-bound sticks, his equipment against all the perils of the unknown, and smiled wistfully, ingratiatingly, up into Paul's face.

"Well?" said the boy.

It all depended on the beginning, for if he should merely nod and turn away there would be nothing left but to follow the sheep out to the silence. The old man eyed him warily.

"Has the baas heard," he asked, "that there is a mad Kafir in the veld?"

"No," said Paul. "A mad Kafir?"

The old man nodded half a dozen times. "There is such a one," he affirmed. The thing was done; the boy would listen, and he let his sticks fall at his feet that he might have two hands to talk with. They were speaking "Kitchen Kafir," the *lingua franca* of the Cape, and since that is a sterile and colorless tongue – the embalmed corpse of the sonorous native speech – the tale would need pantomime to do it justice.

"There is such a one," repeated the shepherd. "He goes about alone, in the day and in the night, talking as he goes to companions who are not there, and laughing sometimes as though they had answered him. And that is very strange."

"Yes," said the boy slowly. His eyes traveled involuntarily to the veld brooding under the sky. "Who has seen him?" he asked.

"I have," said the shepherd, putting a big black forefinger to his own breast. "I have seen him." He held out his great hand before him, with the fingers splayed, and counted on them. "Four nights ago I saw him when the moon was rising."

"And he was mad?"

"Mad as a sheep."

Paul waited for the tale. The old man had touched his interest with the skill of a clever servant practising upon a master. A hint of mystery, of things living under the inscrutable mask of the veld,

could not fail to hold him. He watched the shepherd with a kind of grave intensity as he gathered himself to tell the matter.

"The moon was rising," he said, "and it lay low above the earth, making long shadows of the stones and little bushes. The sheep were here and there, and in the middle of them was I, with a handful of fire and my blanket. It was very still, baas, for the wind was gone down, and I heard nothing at all but the ash sliding in the fire and the slow noise of the sheep eating. There was not even a jackal to stand out of sight and cry in the dark.

"Perhaps I was on the brink of sleep – perhaps I was only cloudy with thoughts – I do not know. But very suddenly I heard singing. – a voice coming nearer that sang a curious music."

"Curious!" The boy was hanging on the words. "Curious!" he repeated.

"It was a song," explained the old Kafir, "but the words of it were meaningless, just noises such as a baby makes – a babble. I listened, for I was not afraid. And soon I could hear footfalls among the stones and the singer came between me and the young moon, very great and black against the sky. It was only when he stood by my fire that I saw he was not a white man, but a Kafir. He was young, a strong young man, wearing clothes and boots." He paused. "Boots," he said again and thrust out his own bare foot, scarred and worn with much traveling. "Boots!"

In a town, it is conceivable that a Kafir may wear boots for purposes of splendor; but not on the Karoo. Paul saw the old man's point; here was an attribute of the unnatural.

"Yes," he said; "go on."

"I was sitting, with my pipe. He stood by the fire and looked down at me, and I could see by the shine of his teeth that he was smiling. But when he spoke, it was like his song – just noises, no speech at all. It was then that I began to doubt him. But I gave him greeting, and moved that he might sit down and smoke with me. He listened and shook his head gently, and spoke again with his slow soft voice in his language of the mad."

"What did it sound like?" demanded Paul.

"Baas, it sounded like English," replied the shepherd. "Yes, there are many Kafirs who speak English; the dorps are noisy with them; but there are none who do not speak Kafir. And this man had come through the night, singing in his strange tongue, going straight forward like one that has a purpose. I and my fire stayed him only for a minute; he was not one of us; he stood, with his head on one side, smiling down, while I began to feel fear and ill-ease. I had it in my mind that this was a ghost, but of a sudden he stooped to where my bread lay – I had newly eaten my supper, and the things still lay about – and took a piece as large as this fist. He seemed to ask for it, but I could not understand him. Then he laughed and tossed something into my lap, and turned again to the night and the long shadows and the things that belong there. His feet moved among the stones and he was gone; and later I heard him singing again in the distance, till his voice dwindled and was lost."

"He threw you something," said the boy. "What was it?"

The old shepherd nodded. "I will show the baas," he said, and made search among precarious pockets. "This is it; I have not spent it."

It was a shilling, looking no larger than sixpence on the flat of his great horny palm. Paul looked at it and turned it over, sensible that something was lacking in it, since it differed in no respect from any other shilling. The magic of madness and the stolid massiveness of Queen Victoria's effigy were not easy to reconcile.

"It looks like a good one," he commented.

"It is good," said the shepherd. "But – " he paused ere he put it in its true light – "the bread was not more than a pennyworth."

A hundred yards away the waiting sheep discharged a small volley of bleats. Paul raised his head.

"Yes," he said, "the veld is full of wonderful things. But I would like to hear that language of the mad."

He nodded in token of dismissal and walked slowly on towards the dam, where the scarlet of the sky had changed the water to blood. The old shepherd picked up his sticks and went heavily after the sheep, a grotesque and laborious figure in that wonder of evening light. The smooth dog slunk towards him, snuffling in welcome; the Kafir dog is not a demonstrative animal, and his snuffle meant much. The shepherd hit him with the longest of the wire-bound sticks.

"Hup!" he grunted. "Get on!"

At the top of the dam wall, the sloping bank of earth and stones that held the water, Paul paused to watch them pass into the shifting distance, ere he went to his concerns at the foot of it. He could not have put a name to the quality in them which stirred him and held him gazing, for beauty is older than speech; but words were not needful to flavor the far prospect of even land, with the sheep moving across it, the squat, swart shape of the shepherd pacing at their heels, and the strange, soft light making the whole unreal and mysterious.

Below the dam wall, the moisture oozing through had made a space of rank grass and trailing weed-vines, and the ground underfoot was cool and damp through the longest day of sun. Here one might sit in the odor of water and watch the wind lift tall spirals of dust and chase them over the monotonous miles where the very bushes rustled like dead boughs at their passage. It had the quality of a heritage, a place where one may be aloof and yet keep an eye on the world, and since there were no others who needed elbow-room for their dreams, Paul had it to himself. Here and there about the sloping bank, as on the walls of a gallery, his handiwork cracked and crumbled in the sun – little masks and figures of red clay which he fashioned to hold some shape that had caught his eye and stayed in it. He had an instinct for the momentary attitude, the quick, unconscious pose which is life, the bunched compact shape of a sheep grazing, the poise of a Kafir girl with a load on her head, a figure revealed in wind-blown clothes and lost in a flash. The sweet, pliant clay was his confidant; it was not the fault of the clay that he could tell it so much less than he knew.

He groped, kneeling, below a vine, and brought out the thing he had hidden there the evening before when the light failed him. A flattened stone at the foot of the wall was his table; he set the clay down tenderly and squatted beside it, with his back to the veld and all the world. It was to be the head of a negro, the negro as Paul knew him, and already the clay had shape. The shallow round of the skull was achieved; he had been feeling, darkly, gropingly, for the brutal angle of the brows that should brood like a cloud over the whole countenance. It had evaded him and baffled him; he knew how it should be, but when the time had come for him to leave it for the night, the brows still cocked themselves in a suggestion of imbecility which was heart-breaking. He turned it round, frowning a little as his habit was when he centered his faculties upon a matter; the chaos of the featureless face below the smooth head fronted him.

"*Allemachtag!*" he cried aloud, as he set eyes on it.

There was no possibility that he could be mistaken; he remembered, in their smallest exasperating detail, those brows as he had left them, taunting him as bad work will. Even now, he had but to close his eyes and he could see them, absurd and clamorous for correction. But – he stared dumbly at the clay as he realized it – since then another creator had played with it, or else the thing, left to itself, had frowned. The rampart of the brows had deepened above the empty face; Paul knew in it the darkness for which he had sought, the age-old patience quenching the spark of the soul. It was as different from what he had left as living flesh is from red clay, an inconsequent miracle.

"Somebody," said Paul, pondering over it – "somebody *knows*!"

The thing troubled him a little while, but he passed his hand over the clay, to make yet more sure of it, and the cool invitation of its softness was medicine for his wonder. He smudged the clay to a ridge in the place where the nose should be, and then, forgetting forthwith that he was the victim of a practical joke, as it seemed, played upon him by the powers of the air, he fell to work.

The colors in the west were burning low when he raised his head, disturbed by a far sound that forced itself on his ear. It was like a pulse in the air, a dull rhythmical throb faintly resonant like the

beating of some great heart. He came to consciousness of it slowly, withdrawing himself unwillingly from the work under his hands, and noting with surprise that the evening light was all but gone. But the face of the negro was a step nearer completion, and even the outline of the gross mouth was there to aid the clay to return his look. The far sound insisted; he lifted his head with mild impatience to listen to it, sighed, and tucked the unfinished head away in its hidingplace. Perhaps another night would draw out the mouth to its destined shape of empty, pitiful mirth.

The beat of the gourd-drum that hung at the farmhouse door still called, and he hastened his steps along the homeward path. It was the common manner of summons on the farm. For the European ear, the gourd sawed across, with a skin stretched over it, is empty of music, but it has the quality of sowing its flat voice over many miles, threading through the voices of nature as a snake goes through grass. Simple variants in the rhythm of the strokes adapt it to messages, and now it was calling Paul. "Paul, Paul, P-P-Paul!" it thrilled, and its summons was as plain as words. To silence it, he put fingers to his mouth and answered with a shrill, rending whistle. The gourd was silent.

His mother was in the doorway as he came through the kraals; she heard his steps and called to him.

"Paul! That you? Where you bin all this time?"

"By the dam," he answered.

"I been callin' you this half hour," she said. "Mrs. Jakes is here – she wants you."

The light from within the house showed her as a thin woman, with the shape of youth yet upon her. But the years had taken tribute of her freshness, and her small, rather vacant face was worn and faded. She wore her hair coiled upon her head in a way to frame the thin oval of the face, and there remained to her yet the slight prettiness of sharp weak gestures and little conscious attitudes. In her voice there survived the clipped accent of London; Paul had come to know it as the thing that distinguished his mother from other women. Before her marriage she had been an actress of the obscure sort to be found in the lesser touring companies, and it was when the enterprise of which she was a member had broken down at the town of Fereira that she met and married the Boer, Christian du Preez, Paul's father. She preserved from the old days a stock of photographs inscribed in dashing hands – "yours to the dregs" – "your old pal" – "yours ever most sincerely" – and so on a few cuttings from newspapers – "Miss Vivie Sinclair as Gertie Gottem was most unique," said the *Dopfontein Courant*– a touch of raucousness in her voice, and a ceaseless weary longing for the easy sham life, the foolish cheerful companions, the stimulus of the daily publicity.

She drew the boy in, sliding her arm through his, to where Mrs. Jakes sat waiting.

"Here he is at last," she said, looking up at him prettily. She often said she was glad her boy was tall enough to go into a picture, but a mother must admire her son for one thing or another.

Mrs. Jakes acknowledged Paul's arrival with a lady-like little smile. "Better late than never," she pronounced.

She was the wife of the doctor at the Sanatorium, the old Dutch house that showed its steep roofs within a couple of miles of the farm, where came in twos and threes the consumptives from England, to mend their broken lungs in the clean air of the Karoo. They came not quite so frequently nowadays, for a few that returned healed, or believing themselves to be healed, had added to their travel-sketches of the wonderful old house and its surroundings an account of Dr. Jakes and his growing habit of withdrawing from his duties to devote himself to drink. Their tales commonly omitted to describe justly the anxious, lonely woman who labored at such times to supply his place, driving herself to contrive and arrange to keep the life of the house moving in its course, to maintain an assured countenance, and all the while to screen him from public shame and ruin. She was a wan little woman, clinging almost with desperation to those trivial mannerisms and fashions of speech which in certain worlds distinguished the lady from the mere person. She had lain of nights beside a drunken husband, she had fought with him when he would have gone out to make a show of his staggering gait and blurred speech – horrible silent battles in a candle-lit room, ending in a gasping

fall and sickness – she had lied and cheated to hide the sorry truth, she had bared her soul in gratitude to her kind God that her child had died. These things as a matter of course, as women accept and belittle their martyrdom; but never in her life had she left the spoon standing in her tea-cup or mislaid her handkerchief. The true standards of her life were still inviolate.

She liked Paul because he was shy and gentle, but not well enough to talk to him without mentioning the weather first.

"The evenings are drawing out nicely," she remarked, leaning to one side in her chair to see through the door the darkness growing dense upon the veld. "It reminds me a little of a June evening in England – if only the rain holds off."

"Yes," said Paul. There would be rain in the ordinary course in three months or so, if all went well, but it was not worth while to go into the matter with Mrs. Jakes.

"We are to have another guest," the lady went on. The doctor's patients were always "guests" when she spoke of them. "A young lady this time. And that is what I came about, really."

"Mrs. Jakes wants you to go in to the station with the Cape-cart and fetch her out, Paul," explained his mother. "You 'll 'ave the first look at her. Mrs. Jakes takes her oath she is young."

Mrs. Jakes shuddered faintly, and looked at the floor.

"About twenty-six, I understand," she said. "About that." Her tone reproached Mrs. du Preez for a lapse of good manners. Mrs. Jakes did not understand the sprightliness of mild misstatement. She turned to Paul.

"If you could manage it," she suggested. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble! The doctor, I 'm sorry to say, has a touch of the sun; he is subject, you know." Her hands clasped nervously in her lap, and her face seemed blind as she beat bravely on. "The climate really does n't suit him at all; he can't stand the heat. I 've begged and prayed him to give it up and go back to private practice at home. But he considers it his duty to keep on."

"The morning train?" asked Paul.

"It is early," lamented Mrs. Jakes. "But we should be so much obliged."

Paul nodded. "All right," he said. "I will bring her, Mrs. Jakes."

There are transactions consecrated to the humorous point of view, landmarks in the history of laughter. Mrs. du Preez honestly believed that a youth and a girl alone in the dawn were a spectacle essentially mirthful.

"Catch him missing the chance," she said, with her slightly jarring laugh. "None of your larks, now, Paul! Promise you 'll behave!"

"Yes, mother," Paul promised gravely, and her face went blank before the clear eyes he turned upon her. Mrs. Jakes in her chair rustled her stiff dress in a wriggle of approval.

"Miss Harding is the name," she told Paul. "You 'll manage to find her? I don't know at all what she 's like, but she comes of a very good family, I believe. You can't mistake her."

"Paul knows the look of the lungy ones by now," Mrs. du Preez assured her. "Don't you, Paul? It 's lungs, of course, Mrs. Jakes?"

"Chest trouble," corrected Mrs. Jakes, nervously. She preferred the less exact phrase, for there is indelicacy in localising diseases, and from the lungs to the bowels it is but a step. "Chest trouble, a slight attack. Fortunately, Miss Harding is taking it in time. The doctor lays stress on the necessity for taking it in time."

"Well," said Mrs. du Preez, "whatever it is, she 'll 'ave the fashions. Lungs or liver, they 've got to dress, and it 'll be something to see a frock again. She 's from London, you said?"

Mrs. Jakes rearranged her black skirts which had suffered by implication, and suppressed an impulse to reply that she had not said London.

"The address is Kensington," she answered. "Very good people live in Kensington."

"There 's shops there, at any rate," said Mrs. du Preez. "Lord, don't I remember 'em! I had lodgings at Hammersmith once myself, and an aunt in the High Street. There 's not much you can tell me about that part."

She nodded a challenge to Mrs. Jakes, who shrank from it.

"Then I can tell the doctor that you 'll meet Miss Harding?" Mrs. Jakes asked Paul. "He will be so obliged. You see, he 'd go himself, only – you quite see? Then I 'll expect Miss Harding for breakfast."

She rose and shook herself, the gentle expert shake that settles a woman's clothes into their place, and tendered him a vague, black-gloved hand. Gloves were among her defenses against the crudities of the Karoo. She was prim in the lamp-light, and extraordinarily detached from the little uncomfortable room, with its pale old photographs of forgotten actors staring down from wall and mantel.

"She may as well see you first," she said, and smiled at him as though there were an understanding between them.

CHAPTER II

At three o'clock in the morning it was still dark, though in the east, low down and gradual, there paled an apprehension of the dawn. From the driving-seat of the high two-wheeled cart, Paul looked forward over the heads of his horses to where the station lights were blurred like a luminous bead on the thread of railway that sliced without a curve from sky to sky. It was the humblest of halting places, with no town at its back to feed the big trains; it owed its existence frankly to a gaunt water-tank for the refreshment of engines. But for Paul it had the significance of a threshold. He could lose himself in the crowding impressions of a train's arrival, as it broadened and grew out of the distance and bore down between the narrow platforms, immense and portentous, and thudded to a standstill as though impatient of the trivial delay. The smell of it, the dull shine of glass and varnish, were linked in his mind with the names of strange, distant cities; it was freighted with the romance of far travel. There were glimpses of cushioned interiors, and tired faces that looked from the windows, giving a perfunctory glance to the Karoo which Paul knew as the world. And once he had watched four men, with a little folding table cramped between their knees, playing cards, low-voiced, alert, each dark predatory face marked with an impassivity that was like the sheath that hides a blade. He stared at them fascinated; not once did they raise their eyes to glance through the window, nor for an instant did one of them slacken his profound attention. Ahead, at the platform's end, the great engine whined like a child that gropes for the breast, till the feed-hose contented it and its gurgle-gurgle succeeded to the thin wail of the steam. The Kafir orange woman made melodious offers of *naartjes* and a hammer clinked critically along the wheels. It was the live season of the day, the poignant moment, its amends for the slow empty hours. But the men about the table had graver concerns. The feed-hose splashed back out of the way, the guard shouted, the brakes whanged loose. The long train jolted and slid, and still they had not looked up. Paul could not leave them; he even ran along the platform till their window distanced him, and then stopped, panting, to watch the tail of the train sink to the horizon. He had seen the Jew in earnest and it left him daunted.

"They wouldn't even look," he was saying, as he went back to his cart. "They wouldn't even look." It served as a revelation to one who looked so much and so fervently.

The other train, which came and went before the daylight, had its equal quality of a swift, brief visitor, and the further mystery of windows lighted dimly through drawn curtains, whereon surprising shadow heads would dawn and vanish in abrupt motion. It was strange to stand beside one and hear from within the crying of an infant and the soothing of a mother, both invisible, arriving from the void on one hand and bound for the void on the other, with the Karoo not even an incident in their passage. Paul wondered whether one day that infant might not pass through again, with trousers and a mustache and a cigar, and another trouble to perturb him and cards and partners to do the soothing.

He arrived well in advance of the time of the train, and tied his docile horses to the hitching rail beside the road. Within the station there was the usual expectant group under the dim lamps, the two or three men who attended to the tank, a Cape Mounted Policeman, spurred and trim, and a few others, besides the half-dozen or so mute and timid Kafirs who lounged at the end of the platform. The white men talked together and shivered at the cold of the night; only the Cape Policeman, secure in his uniform great-coat, stood with legs astraddle and his whip held behind his back, a model of correct military demeanor in the small hours. Paul noted the aggressive beauty of his attitude and his fine young virility, and stared somewhat till the armed man noticed it.

"Well, young feller," he drawled. "You haven't fallen in love with me, have you?"

"No," answered Paul, astonished.

Two or three of the bystanders laughed, and made him uncomfortable. He did not fully understand why he had been spoken to, and stared at his questioner a little helplessly. The policeman smacked his boot with his whip.

"Nor yet me with you," he said. "So if you want to stare, go and stare at something else. See?"

Paul backed away, angry and shy, and moved down the platform to be out of the sound of their voices. The things that people laughed at were seldom clear to him; it seemed that he had been left out of some understanding to take certain things as funny and laugh at them. His mother's mirth, breaking startlingly out of unexpected incidents, out of words spoken without afterthought, out of little accidents and breakages, always puzzled him. It was as little to be understood as her tears, when she would sit silent through a long afternoon of stagnant heat, and burst suddenly into weeping when some one spoke to her.

He came to a standstill at the point where the station roof ended and left the platform bare to the calm skies. The metals gleamed before his feet, ranging out to the veld whence the train would come. He listened for the sound of it, the low drum-note so like the call of the gourd-drum at the farmhouse door, which would herald it even before its funnel dragged its glare into view. There was nothing to be heard, and he turned to the Kafirs behind him, and spoke to one who squatted against the wall apart from the rest.

"Is the train late?" he asked, in the "Kitchen Kafir" of his everyday commerce with natives.

The black man raised his head at the question, but did not answer. Paul repeated it a little louder.

The native held his head as if he listened closely or were deaf. Then he smiled, his white teeth gleaming in the black circle of his shadowed face.

"I 'm sorry," he answered, distinctly; "I can't understand what you say. You 'll have to speak English."

It was the voice of a negro, always vaguely musical, and running to soft full tones, but there was a note in it which made it remarkable and unfamiliar, some turn which suggested (to Paul, at any rate) that this was a man with properties even stranger than his speaking English. He thrilled with a sense of adventure, for this, of course, was the mad creature of the shepherd's tale, who sang to himself of nights when the moon rose on the veld. If a dog had answered him in set phrases, it would not have been more amazing than to hear that precise, aptly modulated voice reply in easy English from the mouth of a Kafir.

"I – I 've heard of you," he said, stammering.

"Have you?" He remembered how the old shepherd had spoken of the man's smile. He was smiling now, looking up at Paul.

"You 've heard of me – I wonder what you 've heard. And I 've seen you, too."

"Where did you see me? Who are you?" asked Paul quickly. The man was mad, according to the shepherd, but Paul was not very clear as to what it meant to be mad, beyond that it enabled one to see things unseen by the sane.

The Kafir turned over, and rose stiffly to his feet, like a man spent with fatigue.

"They 'll wonder if they see me sitting down while I talk to you," he said, with a motion to the group about the Cape Mounted Policeman. His gesture made a confidant of Paul and enlisted him, as it were, in a conspiracy to keep up appearances. It was possible to see him when he stood on his feet, a young man, as tall as the boy, with a skin of warm Kafir black. But the face, the foolish, tragic mask of the negro, shaped for gross, easy emotions, blunted on the grindstone of the races of mankind, was almost unexpected. Paul stared dumbly, trying to link it on some plane of reason with the quiet, schooled voice.

"What was it you were asking me?" the Kafir inquired.

But Paul had forgotten. "Don't you speak anything but English?" he demanded now.

The Kafir smiled again. "A little French," he replied. "Nothing to speak of." He saw that the lad was bewildered, and turned grave at once. "Don't be frightened," he said quickly. "There 's nothing to be frightened of."

Paul shook his head. "I 'm not frightened," he answered slowly. "It 's not that. But – you said you had seen me before?"

"Yes," the Kafir nodded. "One evening about a fortnight ago; you didn't notice me. I was walking on the veld, and I came by a dam, with somebody sitting under the wall and trying to model in clay."

"Oh!" Paul was suddenly illuminated.

"Yes. I 'd have spoken to you then, only you seemed so busy," said the Kafir. "Besides, I didn't know how you 'd take it. But I went there later on and had a look at the things you 'd made. That 's how I saw you."

"Then," said Paul, "it was *you*– "

"Hush!" The Kafir touched him warningly on the arm, for the Cape Policeman had turned at his raised voice to look towards them. "Not so loud. You mean the head? Yes, I went on with it a bit. I hope you didn't mind."

"No," replied Paul. "I did n't mind. No!"

His mind beat helplessly among these incongruities; only one thing was clear; here was a man who could shape things in clay. Upon the brink of that world of which the station was a door, he had encountered a kindred spirit. The thought made him tremble; it was so vital a matter that he could not stay to consider that the spirit was caged in a black skin. The single fact engrossed him to the exclusion of all the other factors in the situation, just as some sight about the farm would strike him while at work, and hold him, absorbed and forgetful of all else, till either its interest was exhausted or he was recalled to his task by a shout across the kraals.

"I did n't mind at all," he replied. "How did you do it? I tried, but it wouldn't come."

"You were n't quite sure what you were trying for," said the Kafir. "Was n't that it?"

"Was it?" wondered Paul.

"I think so." The Kafir's smile shone out again. "Once you 're sure what you mean to do, it 's easy. If I had a piece of clay, I 'd show you. There 's a way of thumbing it up, just a trick, you know – "

"I 'm there every evening," said Paul eagerly. "But tell me: *do* other people make things out of clay, too – over there?"

His arm pointed along the railway; the gesture comprehended sweepingly the cities and habitations of men. The idea that there was a science of fingering clay, that it was practised and studied, excited him wildly.

"Gently!" warned the Kafir. He looked at the boy curiously. "Yes," he said. "Lots of people do it, and lots more go to look at the things they make and talk about them. People pay money to learn to do it, and there are great schools where they are taught to model – to make things, you know, in clay, and stone, and bronze. Did you think it was all done behind dam walls?"

Paul breathed deep. "I did n't know," he murmured.

"Do you know Capetown?" asked the other. "No? It doesn't matter. You 've heard of Jan van Riebeck, though?"

As it happened, Paul had heard of the Surgeon of the Fleet who first carried dominion to the shadow of Table Mountain.

"Well," said the Kafir, "you can imagine Jan van Riebeek, shaped in bronze, standing on a high pedestal at the foot of a great street, with the water of the bay behind him, where his ships used to float, and his strong Dutch face lifted to look up to Table Mountain, as it was when he landed? Don't think of the bronze shape; think of the man. That's what clay is for – to make things like that!"

"Yes, yes. That's what it's for," cried Paul. "But – I never saw anything like that."

"Plenty of time," said the other. "And that's only one of the things to see. In London – "

"You 've been in London?" asked Paul quickly.

"Yes," said the Kafir, nodding. "Why?"

Paul was silent for a space of seconds. When he answered it was in a low voice.

"I 've seen nothing," he said. "I can't find out those ways to work the clay. But – but if somebody would just show me, just teach me those – those tricks you spoke about – "

"All right." The Kafir patted his arm. "Under the dam wall, eh? In the evenings? I 'll come, and then – "

"What?" said Paul eagerly, for he had broken off abruptly.

"The train," said the Kafir, pointing, and sighed.

Paul had been too intent in talk to hear it, but he could see now, floating against the distance, the bead of light which grew while he watched. The group further down the platform dissolved, and the tank-men went past at a run to their work. A voice at his elbow made Paul turn quickly. It was the Cape Mounted Policeman.

"You 're not having any trouble with this nigger, hey?" he demanded.

"No," said Paul, flushing. The Kafir bit off a smile and stood submissive, with an eye on the boy's troubled face.

"You don't want to let them get fresh with you," said the policeman. "I 've been keepin' my eye on him and he talks too much. Have you finished with him now?"

His silver-headed whip came out from behind his back ready to dismiss the negro in the accepted manner. Paul trembled and took a step which brought him near enough to seize the whip if it should flick back for the cut.

"Let him alone," he said wrathfully. "Mind your own business."

"Eh?" the policeman was astonished.

"You let him alone," repeated Paul, bracing himself nervously for combat, and ready to cry because he could not keep from trembling. He had never come to blows in his life, but he meant to now. The policeman stared at him, and laughed harshly.

"He 's a friend of yours, I suppose," he suggested, striving for a monstrous affront.

"Yes," retorted Paul hotly, "he is."

For a moment it looked as though the policeman, outraged in the deepest recesses of his nature, would burst a blood vessel or cry for help. A man whose prayer that he may be damned is granted on the nail could scarcely have looked less shocked. He recovered himself with a gulp.

"Oh, he is, is he? A friend of yours? A nigger!" Then, with a swelling of rage he dodged Paul's grasping hand and swung the whip. "I 'll teach him to – "

He came to a stop, open-mouthed. The Kafir was gone. He had slipped away unheard while they quarreled, and the effect of it was like a conjuring trick. Even Paul gaped at the place where he had been and now was not.

"Blimy!" said the policeman, reduced to an expression of his civilian days, and vented a short bark of laughter. "And *so*, young feller, he 's a friend o' yours, is he? Now, lemme give you just a word of advice."

His young, sun-roughened face was almost paternal for a moment, and Paul shook with a yearning to murder him, to do anything that would wipe the self-satisfaction from it. He sought furiously for a form of anathema that would shatter the man.

"Go to hell," he cried.

"Oh, well," said the policeman, tolerantly, and then the train's magnificent uproar of arrival gave Paul an opportunity to be rid of him.

In the complication of events Paul had all but forgotten his duty of discovering the young lady with "chest trouble," and now he wondered rather dolefully how to set about it. He stood back to watch the carriage windows flow past. Would it be at all possible just to stand where he was and shout "Miss Harding" till she answered? To do that needed some one more like the policeman and less like Paul; the mere thought of it was embarrassing. The alternative was, to wait until such passengers as alighted – they would not be many – had taken themselves away, and then to go up to the one that remained and say, "Is your name Miss Harding, if you please?" But supposing she answered, "Mind your own business!"

The train settled and stood, and Paul became aware that from the carriage nearest him a woman was looking forth, with her face in the full light of a lamp. The inveterate picture-seeker in him suddenly found her engrossing, as she leaned a little forward, lifting her face to the soft meager light, and framed in the varnished wood of the window. It was a pale face, with that delicacy and luster of pallor which make rose tints seem over-robust. It was grave and composed; there was something there which the boy, in his innocence, found at once inscrutable and pitiful, like the bravery of a little child. Distinctly, this was a day of surprises; it came to him that he had not known that the world had women like this. His eyes, always the stronghold of dreams, devoured her, unconscious that she was returning his gaze. Perhaps to her, he also was a source of surprise, with his face rapt and vague, his slender boyishness, his general quality of standing always a little aloof from his surroundings. On the Karoo, people said of him that he was "old-fashioned"; one word is as good as another when folk understand each other. The point was that it was necessary to find some term to set Paul apart from themselves.

He saw the girl was making preparations to leave the carriage, and was suddenly inspired. He found the handle of the door and jerked it open, and there she was above him, and looking down. She wore some kind of scent, very faint and elusive; he was conscious of her as a near and gentle and fragrant personality.

"I hope," he said, letting the words come, "I hope you are Miss Harding?"

The girl smiled. It had been prettily spoken, with the accent of sincerity.

"Yes," she answered. "You have come to meet me?"

The thing about her to which Paul could put no name was that she was finished, a complete and perfect product of a special life, which, whatever its defects and shortcomings, is yet able to put a polish of considerable wearing qualities on its practitioners. She knew her effect; her education had revealed it to her early; she was aware of the pale, intent figure she cut, and her appearance of enlightened virginity. The reverence in the boy's eyes touched her and warmed her at once; it was a charming welcome at the end of that night's journey. Paul's guilelessness had served the specious ends of tact, for to corroborate a woman's opinion of herself is the sublime compliment.

He received the lesser luggage which she handed down to him and then she came down herself, and one train, at least, had shed its marvel upon the Karoo. She was not less wonderful and foreign on the platform than she had been at the window; the Cape Policeman, coming past again, lost his military-man air of a connoisseur in women and stiffened to a strutting perfection of demeanor at sight of her. South Africa is still so short of women that it makes the most of those it can get, both as goddesses and as beasts of burden. Paul was free of the evil civilized habit of thinking while he could feel, and the girl had to despatch the single lanky porter for her baggage herself and attend to having it stacked at the back of the cart. Then she was beside him, with the poignant air from the open south fresh on their faces, and the empty veld before them. The slow dawn was suddenly magical and the stillness was the hush that attends miracles.

He had to give his mind to steering the big cart through the gateway to the road, and it was here that he saw, against the white fence, a waiting figure that looked up and was silent. He bent forward and waved his hand, but the Kafir did not respond. The girl at his side broke silence in her low rich voice.

"That was a native, was n't it?" she asked.

Paul looked at her. "It was a – a friend of mine," he answered seriously. "A Kafir, you know."

The light in the eastern sky had grown and its lower edge, against the rim of the earth, was tinged with a rose-and-bronze presentiment of the sunrise. The Karoo lay under a twilight, with the night stripping from its face like a veil drawn westwards and away. In that half-light, its spacious level, its stillness, its quality of a desert, were enhanced; its few and little inequalities were smoothed out and merged in one empty flatness, and the sky stood over in a single arch, sprinkled with stars that were already burning pale. In all the vast expanse before them, there rose no roof, no tree, no token of human habitation; the eye that wandered forward, returned, like the dove to the Ark, for lack of

a resting-place. It was a world at gaze, brooding grimly. The little morning wind, which would die when the sun rose clear of the horizon and leave the veld to its day-long torpor of heat, leaned upon their faces; the girl raised her brows against it and breathed deeply of its buoyancy.

"Oh," she said; "this is what I came for."

"The air?" Paul glanced sideways at her clear profile set against the shadowy morning. "They say it is good for – for – "

He hesitated; Mrs. Jakes had managed to make the word difficult. But Miss Harding took it in her stride.

"For the lungs?" she suggested without compunction. "Yes, I 'm sure it is. And you live here all the time, do you?"

"I was born here," Paul answered.

"How you must love it," she said, and met his eyes with a look in which there was a certain curiosity. "All this, I mean," she explained. Then: "But do you?"

"Yes," he answered. "It 's – it's fine to look at – if you like looking at things."

It was not all that he desired to say, for he was newly eager to make himself clear to this wonderful person at his side, and he felt that he was not doing himself justice. But Miss Harding had seen inarticulate souls before, aching to be confidential and to make revelations and unable to run their trouble into a mould of speech. They were not uncommon in the neighborhood of her address in Kensington. She smiled her recognition of the phenomenon. "There are not many kinds of men, and only two kinds of boy," she said to herself. She was twenty-six, and she knew.

"Oh, I," she answered. "Yes, I like looking at things."

Paul nodded, watching his horses. "I was sure you did when I saw you at the window," he said. He turned to her, and she smiled at him, interested in the strong simplicity with which he spoke.

"I was sure," he repeated, "and yet nobody like you ever came here before, ever. They always went on in the train. I used to wonder if one of them would never get out, but they never did. They just sat still by the window, with their faces tired and sleepy, and went on again."

He loosed the lash of his whip, and it made lightning circles over the off horse, and the tail of the lash slapped that animal reproachfully on the neck. Miss Harding contented herself with a little incoherent noise of general sympathy. "If I say anything," she thought, "I 'll be knocked off my seat with a compliment."

But Paul had only wanted to tell her; it seemed necessary that she should know something of her value. That done, he was content to drive on in dreaming silence, while the pair of them watched the veld grow momentarily lighter, its bare earth, the very hue and texture of barrenness, spreading and widening before them like water spilt on a floor. The stronger light that showed it to them revealed only a larger vacancy, a void extending where the darkness had stood like a presence. Beside the cart, and no more than a dozen yards away, a heavy bird suddenly uttered a cry and spouted up into the air, with laborious wings, flapping noisily. It rose perhaps thirty feet, with an appearance of great effort, whistled and sank again forthwith, girl laughed; it was such a futile performance.

"What was that?" she asked.

"A lark," was the answer, and Paul turned his eyes to the east. "Look!" he bade her, pointing.

Over the horizon which was like a black bar, set rigid against the heavens, stood the upper edge of the sun, naked and red, – a fiery eye, cocked arrogantly over the sky-line. About it, the very air seemed flooded with color, and the veld reflected it in dull gleams of red.

"And there!" said Paul again, pointing ahead.

They were at the top of a gentle slope, so gradual that it had made no break in the flat prospect of ten minutes ago, and before them, and still so far off that it had the appearance of a delicate and elaborate toy, stood the Sanatorium. In that diamond clearness of air, every detail of it was apparent. Its beautiful serene front, crowned by old Dutch gables mounting in steps to the height of the rooftree,

faced them, frank and fair, over the shadowy reticence of the stone-pillared stoep. Beyond and behind it, the roof of the farm, Paul's home, stood in a dim perspective.

"Is that it?" asked Miss Harding. "Where I am going, I mean."

"Yes," said Paul.

"It's very beautiful," she said.

He smiled contentedly. "I was sure you would say that," he replied. "I am so glad you have come here."

Miss Harding regarded him doubtfully, but decided that no rebuke was necessary.

"Yes," she said, soberly. "It ought to give my lungs a chance."

Paul flicked the long lash towards the off horse again, and spoke no more till he brought the cart to a stand-still at the foot of the fan-shaped flight of steps that led up to the door on the stoep. The big house was voiceless and its windows blank; he was preparing to call out when the front door opened, uncovering a vista of a stone corridor within, simple and splendid, and there emerged Mrs. Jakes to the glory of the new day. She crossed the stoep, challenging the dignity of smooth cold stone with her little black figure of ceremony and her amiable, empty face of formal welcome.

"Miss Harding?" she enquired. "I scarcely expected you so early. Isn't it charming weather?"

Paul helped the girl to alight, and watched the two women as they stood, before entering the house, and exchanged perfunctory civilities.

"And now, to see your room," said Mrs. Jakes at last, and let her pass. "Isn't it fortunate that the rain has held off so nicely?"

Her small voice tinkled indefatigably, and she worked through all the motions of hospitable politeness. But behind her smile her eyes were haggard and stale, and Paul thought that she looked at the girl, as they went in, with the very hate of envy.

CHAPTER III

In the years of his innocence, when the art and practice of medicine were rich with enticements like a bride, Dr. Jakes had taken his dreams in hand to mold them to the shape of his desire. A vision had beckoned to him across the roofs and telegraph wires of South London, where he scuffled for a livelihood as the assistant of a general practitioner; and when he fixed his eyes upon it, it spread and took shape as a great quiet house, noble and gray, harboring within its sober walls the atmosphere of distinguished repose which goes with a practice of the very highest class. Nothing of all its sumptuous appointment was quite so clear to him as that flavor of footfalls muffled and voices subdued; to summon it was to establish a refuge in which he might have brief ease between a tooth-drawing and a confinement. Kindly people who excused a certain want of alacrity in the little doctor by the reflection that he was called out every night might have saved their charity; his droop, his vacancy were only a screen for the splendid hush and shadow of that great visionary mansion. It was peopled, too, with many dim folk, resident patients in attitudes of relaxation; and among them, delicate and urbane, went Dr. Jakes, the sweet and polished vehicle of healing for the pulmonary complaints of the well-bred. Nor was there lacking a lady, rather ghostlike and faint in conformity with the dreamer's ideal of the highest expression of a lady-like quality, but touched, none the less, with warm femininity, an angel and a houri in one, and answering, in the voice of refinement, to the title of Mrs. Jakes.

She had no Christian name then; she was a haunting mellowness, a presence delicate and uplifting. In the murk of the early morning, after a night spent behind drawn blinds in a narrow, tragic room, where another human being entered the world between his hands, he would go home along empty furtive streets, conscious of the comfort of her and glad as with wine, and in such hours he would make it clear to himself that she, at any rate, should never bear a child.

"No," he would say, half aloud and very seriously. "No; it's not in the part. No!"

That gracious and mild presence – he did not entirely lose it even when its place was assailed by the advent of the timid and amiable lady whom he married. She was a daughter of the landed interest; her father owned "weekly property" about Clapham Junction, two streets of forlorn little houses, which rang day and night with the passing of trains, and furnished to the population a constant supply of unwelcome babies. Dr. Jakes knew the value of property of that kind, and perhaps his knowledge did something to quicken his interest in a sallow, meager girl whom he encountered in the house of his employer. She brought him a thousand pounds in money, means ready to his hand to anchor the old vision to earth and run it on commercial lines; it puzzled him a little that the vision no longer responded to his summons so readily as of old. It had degenerated from an inspiration to a mere scheme, best expressed in the language of the prospectus; the fine zest of it was gone beyond recovery. There was no recapturing its gentle languors, the brooding silence of it; still less was it possible when, by the mere momentum of his plans, he had moved to South Africa and found him a house, to reproduce that reposefulness as the main character of the establishment. Such effects as he gained, during the brief strenuousness that he manifested on taking possession, were the merest caricatures of the splendid original, mocking his impotence. The thousand pounds, too, which at first had some of the fine, vague, inexhaustible quality of a dream, proved inelastic, and by the time the baby came, Dr. Jakes was already buying whisky by the case. The baby was a brief incident, a caller rather than a visitor, so ephemeral that it was scarcely a nuisance before it departed again in search of a peace less dependent on the arrangement of furniture than that which Dr. Jakes had sought to bring into being.

All life is a compromise; between the dream and the exigencies of Dr. Jakes' position the Sanatorium had emerged. The fine, simple, old house had an air of its own, which no base use could entirely destroy. Its flat front, pedestaled upon a wide, flagged stoep, faced to the southeast and made a stronghold of shade in the noonday vehemence of the sun. Its rooms were great and low, with

wide solemn windows regarding the monotony of the level veld; they stood between straight corridors where one's footsteps rang as one walked. The art of its builders had so fashioned it that it stood on the naked ground like a thing native to it, not interrupting nor affronting that sweep of vacant miles, but enhancing it. The stolid Dutch builders knew how to make their profit out of wide horizons. They had conceived a frame for lives which should ripen in face of the Karoo, gleaming on its barrenness a measure of its tranquillity. They built a home; and of it Dr. Jakes had made a Home.

There remained yet, of all the decorous and ceremonial processes which were to maintain and give color to the life of the Sanatorium as he had conceived it of old, only one function. The two men patients who were left to him did as they pleased in most respects, but if they took tea in the afternoon they took it from Mrs. Jakes in the drawing-room after an established usage, with formal handing to and fro of plates and cups in the manner of civilized society. Jakes was seldom too unwell to be present at this function, and it was here, with his household at his back, that Margaret saw him first.

Weariness had come upon her with the rush of an overtaking pursuer as Mrs. Jakes brought her into the house and away from the spreading dawn, and that lady had cut short the forms of politeness to bid her go to bed. She woke to the warmth of afternoon and the glow of its sun slanting upon the floor of her room and was aware at once of a genial presence. At the window a tall, stout Kafir woman, her head bound in a red and yellow handkerchief in a fashion which reminded Margaret of pictures of pirates, was tweaking the tails of the spring-blinds and taking delight in watching them run up with a whir and click. She turned at the sound of Margaret's movement, and flashed a brilliant smile upon her.

"Missis sleeping too long," she observed. "Tea now."

The mere good humor of her was infectious and Margaret smiled in return.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Me? Fat Mary," was the answer. She laughed easily, willing to make or be a joke according to Margaret's humor. "Fat Mary, because – " she sought for a word in the unfamiliar English and then gave it up. "Because," she repeated, and traced her ample circumference with a black finger. "You see?"

"I see," said Margaret, and prepared to get up.

Her long sleep had restored her and there was comfort, too, in waking to the willing humanity of Fat Mary's smiles, instead of to the starched cuffs and starched countenance of some formal trained and mechanical nurse. Fat Mary was not a deft maid; she was too easily amused at niceties of the toilet, and Margaret could not help feeling that she regarded the process of dressing as a performance which she could discuss later with her friends; but at least she was interested. She revolved helpfully about the girl, to the noise of bumped furniture and of large bare feet scraping on the mats, like a bulky planet about a wan and diminutive sun, and made mistakes and laughed and was buoyant and alight with smiles – all with a suggestion of gentle and reverent playfulness such as a more than usually grown person might use with a child.

"Too much clothes," was her final comment, when Margaret at last was ready and stood, slim and sober, under her inspection. "Like bundles," she added, thoughtfully. "But Missis is skinny."

"Where do we go now?" asked Margaret.

"Tea," replied Fat Mary, and led the way downstairs by a wide and noble staircase to the gray shadows of the stone hall. There was a simple splendor about the house which roused the connoisseur in Margaret, a grandeur which was all of proportion and mass, and the few articles of furniture which stood about were dim and shabby in contrast to it. She had only time to note so much when Fat Mary opened a door for her, and she was facing across a wide room to broad windows flooded with sunlight and aware of Mrs. Jakes rising from behind a little tea-table and coming forward to meet her. Two men, a young one and an old one, rose from their chairs near the window as she entered, and a third was standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the empty hearth.

"Quite rested now?" Mrs. Jakes was asking. "You 've had a nice long sleep. Let me introduce the doctor. Eustace – this is Miss Harding."

Dr. Jakes advanced from the hearth-rug; Margaret thought he started forward rather abruptly as his name was spoken. He gave her a loose, hot hand.

"Charmed," he said in a voice that was not quite free from hoarseness. "We were just out of ladies, Miss Harding. This is a great pleasure; a great pleasure."

"Thank you," murmured Margaret vaguely.

He was a short plump man, with a big head and round spectacles that gave him the aspect of a large, deliberate bird. He was dressed for the afternoon in formal black, the uniform of his calling, though the window framed shimmering vistas of heat. He peered up at her with a sort of appeal on his plump, amiable face, as though he were conscious of that quality in him which made the girl shrink involuntarily while he held her hand, which no decent austerity of broadcloth could veil from her scrutiny. There was something about him at once sleepy and tormented, the state in which a man lies all day full-dressed upon a bed and goes habitually unbuttoned. It was the salient character in him, and he seemed to search her face in a faint hope that she would not recognize it. He dropped her hand with a momentary knitting of his brows like the ghost of despair, and talked on.

"It 's the air we depend on," he told her. "Wonderful air here, Miss Harding – the breath of healing, you know. It doesn't suit me, but then I 'm not here for my health."

He laughed uncertainly, and ceased abruptly when he saw that no one laughed with him. He was like a child in disgrace trying to win and conciliate a circle of remorseless elders.

Mrs. Jakes interrupted with a further introduction. While the doctor spoke, she had been standing by like an umpire. "Mr. Ford," she said now, and the younger of the two men by the window bowed to her without speaking across the tea-table. His back was to the window and he stood silhouetted against the golden haze which filled it, and Margaret saw only that he was tall and slender and moved with easy deliberation.

"Mr. Samson," said Mrs. Jakes next.

This was the elder man. He came forward to her, showing a thin, sophisticated old face with cloudy white eyebrows, and shook hands in a pronounced manner.

"Ah, you come like a gleam of sunshine," he announced, in a thin voice that was like a piece of bravado. "A gleam of sunshine, by gad! We 're not much to look at, Miss Harding; a set of crocks, you know – bellows to mend, and all that sort of thing, but, by gad, we 're English, and we 're glad to see a countrywoman."

He cocked his white head at her gallantly and straddled his legs in their neat gray trousers with a stiff swagger.

"My mother was Irish," observed Mrs. Jakes brightly. "But Miss Harding must have some tea."

Mr. Samson skipped before to draw out a chair for her, and Margaret was established at Mrs. Jakes' elbow. The doctor came across the room to hand her bread and butter; that done, he retired again to his place on the hearth-rug and to his cup, lodged upon the mantel-shelf. It seemed that this was his place, outside the circle by the window.

"Charming weather we 're having," announced Mrs. Jakes, conscientiously assailing an interval of silence. "If it only lasts!"

Mr. Samson, with his back to the wall and his teacup wavering in his thin hand, snorted.

"Weather!" he said. "Ya-as, we do get weather. 'Bout all we do get here, – eh, Jakes?"

Behind Margaret's back the doctor's teaspoon clinked in his saucer, and he said something indistinct, in which the words "wonderful air" alone reached her. She hitched her chair a pace sideways, so as to see him.

Mrs. Jakes was looking over her with the acute eyes of a shopper which took in and estimated each detail of her raiment.

"I suppose, now," she remarked thoughtfully, "in England, the spring fashions were just coming out."

"I don't know, really," Margaret answered. "When I left, the principal wear seemed to be umbrellas. It 's been an awful winter – rain every day."

"Aha!" Mr. Samson returned to the charge. "Rain, eh? Cab-wheels squirting mud at you all along the street, eh? Trees blubbering over the railings like bally babies, eh? Women bunchin' up their skirts and hoppin' over the puddles like dicky-birds, eh? I know, I know; don't I just know! How 'd you like a mouthful of that air, eh, Ford? Bad for the lungs – yes! But good, deuced good for the heart."

The young man in the window raised his head when he was addressed and nodded. From the hearth-rug Dr. Jakes murmured audibly: "Influenza."

"That of course," said Mrs. Jakes indulgently. "Were there many people in town, Miss Harding?"

"People!" Margaret was mystified for the moment. "Oh, yes, I think so."

She was puzzled by the general attitude of the others towards the little doctor; it was a matter into which she had yet to be initiated. It was as though there existed a tacit understanding to suffer his presence and keep an eye upon him. It conveyed to her a sense that these people knew things about him which would not bear telling, and held the key to his manner of one dully afflicted. When he moved or managed to make some small clatter in setting his cup on the mantel-shelf, Mrs. Jakes turned a swift eye upon him, inspected him suspiciously and turned away again. If he spoke, the person addressed seemed to turn his remark over and examine it for contraband meanings before making a perfunctory answer. He was like a prisoner handicapped by previous convictions or a dog conscious of a bad name. When he managed to catch the girl's eye, he gave her weak, hopeful, little smiles, and subsided quickly if any one else saw him, as though he had been caught doing some forbidden thing. The thing troubled her a little. Her malady had made a sharp interruption in her life and she had come to the Karoo in the sure hope that there she would be restored and given a warrant to return finally to her own world and deal with it unhampered. The doctors who had bidden her go had spoken confidently of an early cure; they were smooth men who made a good show of their expert knowledge. She had looked to find such a man at her journey's end, a doctor with the marks of a doctor, his social adroitness, his personal strength and style, his confidence and superiority to the weaknesses of diseased flesh. This little man, dazed and dumb, standing apart like a child who has been put in the corner, did not realize her expectations. If medical skill, the art and dexterity of a physician, dwelt in him, they had, she reflected, fallen among thieves.

"You have only three patients here now?" she asked Mrs. Jakes.

"At present," answered Mrs. Jakes. "It's a convenient number. The doctor, you see, can give them so much more attention than if there were a houseful. Yes, it's really better for everybody."

As she finished, Margaret looked up and caught the eye of the young man, Ford, fixed upon her, as though he watched to see how she would take it. He was a tall youth with a dark impassive face and level brows, and his malady announced itself in a certain delicacy of coloring and general texture and in attitudes which slacked naturally to invalid languors. While the others talked, he sat on the ledge of the window, looking out to the veld prostrate under the thresh of the sun. In any talkative assembly, the silent man is at an advantage, and this tall youth seemed to sit without the little circle of desultory tongues and dwarf it by his mere aloofness. His glance now seemed to convey a hint to her to accept, to pass over, things that needed explanation and to promise revelations at a more fitting time.

"You see," Mrs. Jakes continued, when Margaret had murmured noises of acquiescence; "you see, each patient requires his individual attention. And – " she sank her voice to a confidential undertone – "he 's not *strong*."

She nodded past Margaret's shoulder at Jakes, who was drinking from his cup with precautions against noise. He caught her look over the rim of it and choked. Ford smiled faintly and turned to the window again.

"The Karoo does n't suit him a bit," Mrs. Jakes went on. "Too bracing, you know. He 's often quite ill. But he won't leave."

"Why?" asked Margaret. The doctor was busy with his handkerchief, removing the traces of the accident from his waistcoat.

Mrs. Jakes looked serious. "Duty," she replied, and pursed her pale lips. "He considers it his duty to remain here. It 's his life-work, you know."

Ford's eye caught Margaret's again, warning and inviting. "It 's – it's very unselfish of him," she said.

"Yes!" said Mrs. Jakes. "It is." And she nodded at Margaret as much as to ask, "And now, what have you got to say?"

The doctor managed the tea stains to his satisfaction and came across the room, replacing the cup and saucer on the table with a hand that was not quite steady. In the broad light of the window, he had a strained look; one familiar with such matters would have known that the man was raw and tense with the after effects of heavy drinking. He looked down at Margaret with an uncertain smile.

"I must have a little talk with Miss Harding," he said. "We must find out how matters stand. Will you bring her to my study presently, my dear?"

"In a quarter of an hour?" suggested Mrs. Jakes. He nodded. Ford did not turn from his idle gazing through the window and old Samson did not cease from looking at him with an arrogant fixity that seemed on the point of breaking into spoken denunciations. He looked from one to the other with a hardy little smile, then sighed and went out.

His going was the signal for the breaking up of the gathering. Old Samson coughed and walked off and Ford disappeared with him.

"And what would you care to do now?" asked Mrs. Jakes of Margaret. "I have some very good views of Windsor, if you like. You know Windsor?"

Margaret shook her head. Windsor had no attractions for her. What interested her much more was the fact that this small, bleak woman was on the defensive, patently standing guard over privacies of her life, and acutely ready to repel boarders who might endeavor to force an intimacy upon her. It was plain in the rigor of her countenance, set into a mask, and in each tone of her voice. Margaret had yet to undergo her interview with Dr. Jakes in his study, and till that was over, and she definitely enlisted for or against him, Mrs. Jakes would preserve an armed neutrality.

"I think," said Margaret, "I 'd like to go out to the veranda."

"We call it the stoep," corrected Mrs. Jakes. "A Dutch word, I believe. By all means; you 'll probably find Mr. Ford there and I will call you when the doctor is ready."

The stone hall held its cathedral shadows inviolate, and from it Margaret went forth to a westering sun that filled the earth with light, and painted the shadow of the house in startling black upon the ground. She stood between the square pillars with their dead and ruined vines and looked forth at a land upon which the light stood stagnant. It was as though the Karoo challenged her conception of it. She had seen it last vague with the illusions of the dawn, hemmed in by mists and shadows that seemed to veil the distances and what they held. Now these were stripped from it to reveal only a vast nakedness, of red and red-brown and gray, all ardent in the afternoon sun. The shadows had promised a mystery, the light discovered a void. It ran from before her yet in a single sweep to a horizon upon which the blue of remote hills was a faint blur, and in all the far prospect of it there was not one roof, no single interruption to its still level. Margaret, quickly sensitive to the quality of her environment, gazed at it almost with a sense of awe, baffled by the fact that no words at her command were pliant enough to fit it. It was not "wild" nor "desolate" nor even "beautiful"; none of the words allotted to landscapes, with which folk are used to label the land they live upon, could be stretched to the compass of this great staring vacancy. It was outside of language; it struck a note not included in the gamut of speech. "Inhuman" came nearest to it, for the salient quality of it was something that bore no relation to the lives – and deaths – of men.

A sound of coughing recalled her from her contemplation of it, and she walked along the stoep towards it. Behind a pillar near the corner of the house, Ford sat on a camp-stool, with a little easel before him, and smudged with his thumb at the paint on a small canvas.

He looked up at her with no token of welcome, but rather as though he withdrew himself unwillingly from his picture.

"Well?" he said, motioning with his head at the wide prospect before them. "What d'you think of it?"

"Oh, a lot," replied Margaret, refusing to commit herself with adjectives. "Can I see?"

He sat back to give her room to look. She had in her time spent sincere days at one of the art schools which help Kensington to its character and was prepared to appreciate expertly. It was a sketch in oils, done mostly with the thumb and palette-knife, a *croûte* of the most obvious – paint piled in ridges as though the artist would have built his subject in relief upon the canvas, perspective improvised by the light of nature, crudities, brutalities of color, obtruded in the effort for breadth. They were all there. She stared into this mist of blemishes in an effort to see what the painter saw and could not set down, and had to give it up.

In the art school it had been the custom to tell one's fellows the curt, unwelcome truth.

"You can't paint," said Margaret.

"Oh, I know that," answered Ford. "You weren't looking for that, were you?"

"For what, then?" asked Margaret.

He hitched himself up to the canvas again, and began to smudge with his thumb at a mess of yellow ocre.

"There 's something in it that I can see," he said. "I 've been watching this – this desert for more than a year, you know, and I try to get in what I see in it. You can't see anything?"

"No," said Margaret. "But I did try." She watched his unskilful handling of the ocre. "I could show you a thing or two," she suggested.

She had all a woman's love for technique, and might have been satisfied with more skill and less purpose. But Ford shook his head.

"No, thank you," he said. "It's not worth while. I 'm only painting for myself. I know what I mean by these messes I make; if I could paint more, I mightn't be so pleased with it."

"As you like, of course," said Margaret, a little disappointed.

He worked in silence for about a minute.

"You didn't like the looks of Dr. Jakes?" he suggested suddenly. "I saw you wondering at him in there."

"Well," Margaret hesitated. "He seemed rather out of it," she answered. "Is there anything – wrong – with him?"

Ford was making an irreparable mess of his picture and did not look up.

"Wrong?" he repeated. "Well, depends what you call wrong. He drinks."

"Drinks!" Margaret did not like the matter-of-fact way in which he said it. "Do you mean – "

"He 's a drunkard – he goes to bed drunk. His nerves were like banjo strings this afternoon; he couldn't keep his hands still. You noticed it? That was last night's drinking; he didn't get to bed till daylight. I heard him struggling up the stairs, with Mrs. Jakes whispering to him not to make a noise and helping him. That was just before you came."

"Poor thing!"

"Yes – poor thing!" Ford looked up at the girl sharply. "You 've got it, Miss Harding. It 's Mrs. Jakes that suffers. Jakes has got his liquor, and that makes up to him for a lot. You and I, we 've got – whatever we have got, little or much. Old Samson 's got his memories and his pose; he gets along all right with them. But she 's got nothing at all – only the feeling that she 's managed to screen him and prop him and fooled people into thinking she 's the wife of a decent man. That 's all."

"But," said Margaret, "is he safe?"

"Safe? Oh, I forgot that he was to see you in his study. He won't reel about and fall down, if that 's what you mean. *That* part of it is all done in private; Mrs. Jakes gets the benefit of *that.* And as to his patients, he really does know a little about lungs when he 's sober, and there 's always the air. Oh, he 's safe enough."

"It's dreadful," said Margaret. She was at a loss; the men she knew did not get drunk. When they went to the bad, they chose different roads; this one seemed ankle-deep with defilement. She recalled Mrs. Jakes when she had come forth from the silent house to meet her in the chill dawn, and a vision flashed upon her of the vigil that must have been hers through the slow night, listening to the chink of bottle on glass and waiting, waiting in misery and fear to do that final office of helping the drunken man to his bed. Her primness, her wan gentility, her little affectations of fashion, seemed monstrously heroic in the light of that vision – she had carried them with her to the pit of her humiliation and brought them forth again unsullied, the spotless armor of a woman of no account.

"You understand now?" asked Ford, watching her.

"Yes," answered Margaret, slowly. "But it frightens me. I wish I hadn't got to see him in his study. What will he do?"

"Hush!" said Ford. "Here comes Mrs. Jakes. Don't let her hear you. He won't do anything."

He fell to his work again, and Margaret turned to receive the doctor's wife.

"The doctor will see you now, Miss Harding," said Mrs. Jakes. "Will you come with me?"

She eyed the pair of them with a suspicion she could not altogether hide, and Ford was careful to hold an impassive face.

"I am quite ready," returned Margaret, nerving herself for what had assumed the proportions of an ordeal, and went with her obediently.

Jakes' study was a small, rather dark room opening off the hall, in which the apparatus of his profession was set forth to make as much show as possible. His desk, his carpet, his leather chairs and bookcases did their best to counterfeit a due studiousness in his behalf, and a high shelf of blue and green bottles, with a microscope among them, counteracted their effect by suggesting to the irreverent that here science was "skied" while practice was hung on the line. This first interview was a convention in the case of every new patient. Dr. Jakes always saw them alone as a matter of professional honor. Mrs. Jakes would make a preliminary inspection of him to assure herself and him that he was fit for it; old Mr. Samson, passing by the half-open door once, had seen her bending over him, smelling his breath critically; and then she would trust him to his patient's good will and to the arbitrary Providence which ruled her world.

"Miss Harding, Eustace," she announced at the door of the study and motioned the girl to enter.

The little doctor rose with bustling haste, and looked at her with melancholy eyes. There was a smell of eau de Cologne in the room, which seemed natural at the time to its rather comfortable shabbiness.

"Sit down, sit down, Miss Harding," he said, and made a business of thrusting forward one of the leather chairs to the side of his desk. Seated, she faced him across a corner of it. In the interval that had elapsed since she had seen him at tea, he seemed to have recovered himself somewhat. Some of the strain was gone from him, and he was grave with a less effect of effort and discomfort.

He put his open hand upon a paper that lay before him.

"It was Dr. Mackintosh who ordered you south?" he asked. "A clever man, Miss Harding. I have his letter here about your case. Now, I want you to answer a question or two before we listen to that lung of yours."

"Certainly," said Margaret.

She was conscious of some surprise that he should move so directly to the matter in hand. It relieved her of vague fears with which Ford's warning had filled her, and as he went on to question her searchingly, her nervousness departed. The little man who fell so far short of her ideal of a doctor knew his business; even a patient like herself, with all a patient's prejudice and ignorance, could tell

by the line his questions took that he had her case by heart. He was clearly on familiar ground, a fact which had power to reassure her, and she told herself that, after all, his resigned, plump face was not entirely repulsive.

"A queer little man," she said to herself. "Queer enough to be a genius, perhaps."

"And, now, please, we 'll just hear how things really are. No, I don't think you need undo anything. Yes, like that."

As he explored her chest and side with the stethoscope, his head was just under her face, the back of it rumpled like the head of some huge and clumsy baby. It was fluffy and innocent and comical, and Margaret smiled above him. Every one has his best aspect, or photographers would crowd the workhouses and the manufacturers of pink lampshades would starve. Dr. Jakes should have made more of the back of his head and less of his poor, uncertain face.

But he was done with the stethoscope at last, and as he raised his head his face came close to hers and the taint of his breath reached her nostrils. Suddenly she understood the eau de Cologne.

"Well," he said, sitting down again; "now we know where we are."

He had seen her little start of disgust and annoyance at the smell of him, and kept his eyes on the paper before him, playing with a corner of it between his fingers as he spoke.

"Will I get well?" asked Margaret, directly.

"Yes," he answered, without hesitating.

"I 'm glad," she said. "I 'm awfully glad. Thank you."

"I 'll see about your treatment," he said, without raising his eyes. "But I needn't keep you now. Only – "

"Yes?"

"You mustn't be afraid," he continued. "Not of anything. Do you understand? You mustn't be afraid."

Margaret wished he would look up. "I 'm not afraid," she answered. "Really I 'm not."

Dr. Jakes sighed and rose slowly. The trouble had descended on him again, and he looked sorry and dull.

"That 's right," he said without heartiness, and moved to open the door for her. His appealing eyes dwelt on her for a moment. "This isn't England," he added, with a heavy deliberation. "We 're none of us here because we like it. But – but don't be afraid, Miss Harding."

"I 'm sure there 's nothing to be afraid of," answered Margaret, moved – he was so mournful in his shame. He bowed to her, a slow peck of his big head, and she went.

In the hall, Mrs. Jakes met her and challenged her.

"Well," she said; "and what does the doctor say about you?"

Margaret smiled at her. "He says I shall get well, and I believe he knows," she answered.

It was as though some stiffening in Mrs. Jakes had suddenly resigned its functions. She softened before the girl's eyes.

"Of course he knows," she said contentedly. "Of course he knows. My dear, he really does know."

"I 'm sure he does," agreed Margaret.

Mrs. Jakes put a hand on her arm. "I feel certain we 're going to be friends," she said. "You 're so pretty and – and distinguished. And – and what a pretty frock you 've got!"

She hesitated an instant, and was very timid and humble.

"I should love to see you unpack," she said earnestly.

CHAPTER IV

The strength of a community, of almost any community, is its momentum; it is easier to go on than to pull up, even though its progress be erratic and the tear exceed the wear. Dr. Jakes' Sanatorium was a house divided against itself and poised for a downfall; but the course of its daily life had yet current enough to pick up a newcomer and float him from his independent foothold. The long languors of its days, its deep whispering nights, were opiates for the critical and exacting, so that before they had made it clear to themselves that this was no place for them, they were absorbed, merged in, the eventless quiet of the house and its people. For some – for most of them, indeed – there came at last a poignant day when Paul and his tall horses halted at the door to carry them to the station, and it was strange with what a reluctance they rode finally across the horizon that rose up to shut the big gray house from view, and how they hesitated and frowned and talked curtly when the station opened out before them and offered them the freedom of the world. And for the others, those who traveled the longer journey and alone, there stood upon the veld, a mile from the house, an enclosure of barbed wire – barbed against – what? For them came stout packing cases, which made the Kafirs sweat by their weight, and being opened, yielded some small cross of marble, black-lettered with name and dates and sorrowful texts; the lizards sunned themselves all day upon these monuments, for none disturbed them.

At the Sanatorium, day began in the cool of morning with a padding of bare feet in the long corridors and the fresh wakeful smell of coffee. Africa begins its day with coffee; it is the stirrup-cup of the country. Margaret opened her eyes to the brightness of morning and the brisk presence of Fat Mary, radiant across her adventurously held tray of coffee cups and reflecting the joy of the new light in her exulting smile. She had caught from Mrs. Jakes the first rule of polite conversation, though none of the subsequent ones, and she always began with a tribute of words to the weather.

"Sun burning plenty; how 's Missis?" was her usual opening gambit.

The wide-open windows flushed the room with air, sweet from the night's refreshment; and Margaret came to value that hour between the administration of coffee and the time for rising; it was the *bonne bouche*of the day. From her pillows she could lie and see the far mists making a last stand against the shock of the sun, breaking and diffusing before his attack and yielding up wider views of the rusty plain at each minute, till at last the dim blue of infinitely remote hills thickened the horizon. At the farm, a mile away, figures moved about and among the kraals, wonderfully and delicately clear in that diamond air which stirred her blood like wine. She could even make out Paul; the distance robbed him of nothing of his deliberate, dreamy character as he went to and fro with his air of one concerned with greater things than the mere immediacies of every day. There was always a suggestion about him of one who stoops from cloudy altitudes of preoccupation to the little concerns of men, and towards Margaret he wore the manner of having a secret to divulge which was difficult to name. She met him sometimes on the veld paths between the two houses, and each time he seemed to draw near the critical moment of confession and fall back from it baffled. And though Margaret in her time had heard many confidences from many men and had made much progress in the subtle arts of the confidante, this was a case beyond her powers. The deftly sympathetic corkscrew failed to unbottle whatever moved in his mind; he evidently meant to bide his time. Meanwhile, seen from afar, he was a feature of the before-breakfast hour, part of the upholstery of the morning.

It was when she heard Mr. Samson pass her door on his way to the bath that she knew the house was definitely awake. He wore Turkish slippers that announced him as he went with the slap-slap of their heels upon the floor. Once, putting her head forth from the door incautiously to scout for Fat Mary she had beheld him, with his bath-robe girt about him by its tasseled cord and bath towels round his neck, going faithfully to the ritual initiation of his daily round, a figure consistent with the most correct gentlemanly tradition. The loose robe and the towels gave him girth and substance, and

on the wary, intolerant old face, with its gay white mustache, was fixed a look of serious purpose. Mr. Samson never trifled with his toilet, by gad – what? Later, on his return, she would hear his debonair knock on Ford's door. "Out with you!" he would pipe – he never varied it. "Out with you! Bright and early, my boy – bright and early – what?" An answer growled from within contented him, and he would turn in at his room, there to build up the completed personality which he offered daily to the world. It took time, too, and a meek Kafir valet, for a man is not made and perfected in a minute or two, and the result never failed to justify the labor. When next he appeared it would be as a member of the upper classes, armored and equipped, treading the stoep in a five-minutes' constitutional in a manner that at once dignified and lightened it. When one looked at him, one thought instinctively of exclusive clubs, of fine afternoons in Piccadilly, of the landed interest and the Church of England. One judged that his tailor loved him. He had a cock of the head, with a Homburg hat upon it, and a way of swelling his neck over the edge of his conservative collar, that were the very ensign of gallantry and spirit. It was only when he coughed that the power abandoned him, and it was shocking and pitiful to see the fine flower of gentility rattled like a dice-box in the throes of his malady and dropped at last against a wall, wheezing and gasping for breath in the image of a weak and stricken old man.

"Against the ropes," he would stammer shakily as he gathered himself together again, sniffling into his beautiful handkerchief. "Got me against the ropes, it did. Damn it – what?"

He suffered somewhat in his aggressive effect from the lack of victims. He had exhausted his black valet's capacity for being blasted by a glance, and had fallen back on Dr. Jakes. The wretched little doctor had to bear the brunt of his high severity when he came among his patients racked and quivering from his restless bed, and his bleared and tragic eyes appealed in vain for mercy from that high priest of correct demeanor. Mr. Samson looked at him as a justice of the peace, detained upon the bench when he should be at lunch and conscious that his services to the State are gratuitous, might look upon a malefactor who has gone to the length of being without visible means of subsistence. The doctor might wriggle and smile painfully and seek the obscurity of corners, but it could not serve him; there was no getting out of range of that righteous and manly battery while he stayed in the same room with it. Once, however, he spiked its guns. The glare across the tea-table, the unspoken sheer weight of rebuke and condemnation, seemed to suddenly break up the poisoned fog that clouded his faculties, and he lifted his face, shining a little as with sweat, in a quick look at Mr. Samson. Margaret, who saw it, recognized it; just so he had looked in his study when he questioned her on her case and bent his mind to the consideration of it. It was direct, expert, impersonal, the dehumanized scrutiny of the man whose trade is with flesh and blood. Something had stirred the physician in the marrow of the man, and from a judge and an executioner of justice, a drawing-room hangman, Mr. Samson had become a case. At the beginning of it, Mrs. Jakes, unfailingly watchful, had opened her mouth to speak and save the situation, but she too saw in time and closed her mouth again. Mr. Samson glowered and the hectic in his thin cheeks burned brighter.

"You 've seen me before, Jakes!" he said, crisply.

The little doctor nodded almost easily. "Your hand, please," he said. "Thanks."

His forefinger found the pulse and dwelt on it; he waited with lips pursed, frowning.

"As I thought," he said, dropping the stringy white hand again. "Yes! I 'll see you in the study, Mr. Samson, please – in half an hour."

Mr. Samson gulped but stood up manfully. He was at his best, standing, by reason of a certain legginess which had been taken into account in the design of his clothes, but now those clothes seemed big for him.

"What is it?" he demanded, throwing his courage into his voice.

Dr. Jakes warned him with an uplifted finger.

"Sit down," he said. "Keep quiet. I 'll see you in half an hour."

He looked round at Margaret and the rest of them thoughtfully and went back to his place by the mantel-piece, sighing. It was his signal to them that his brief display of efficiency was over, and as though to screen his retreat, Mrs. Jakes coughed and hoped loudly that the rain would hold off.

But Mr. Samson made his way to a chair and sat down in it heavily, grasping its arms with his hands, and Margaret noticed for the first time that he was an old man.

Apparently the thing that threatened Mr. Samson was not very serious, or else the doctor had found means to head it off in time, for though he went from the study to his bed, he was at breakfast next morning, with a fastidious appetite and thereafter the course of his life remained unaltered.

Breakfast at the Sanatorium was in theory a meal that might be taken at any hour from eight till half past eleven. In the days of his dream, Dr. Jakes had seen dimly silver dishes with spirit lamps under them and a house-party effect of folk dropping in as they came down and helping themselves. But Mrs. Jakes' thousand pounds had stopped short of the silver dishes and Mrs. Jakes herself could not be restrained from attending in person to see that the coffee was hot. Therefore, since it was not possible in any conscience to bind Mrs. Jakes to her post till noon, breakfast occurred between half-past eight and half-past nine.

The freshness, the exuberance, of the morning were not for her; already she wore the aspect of one who has done a stage of the day's journey and shed the bloom of her vigor upon it. The sunlight, waxing like a tide in flood, was powerless to lift her prim, black-dressed personality from the level of its cares and functions. She made to each as he entered the same mechanical little bow across the crockery, smiled the same formal smile from the lips outwards and uttered the same small comment on the blaze of day that filled the earth without the window. She had her life trimmed down to a routine for convenience of handling; she was one of those people – they are the salt of the earth! – whose passions are monosyllabic, whose woes are inarticulate. The three who sat daily at meat with her knew and told each other that her composure, her face keyed up like an instrument to its pitch of vacant propriety, were a mask. Sometimes, even, there had been sounds in the night to assure them of it; occasionally Jakes, on his way to bed in the small hours, would slip on the stairs and bump down a dozen or so of them, and lie where he fell till he was picked up and set on his way again; there would be the rasp of labored breath as he was supported along the corridor, and the mumble of his blurred speech hushed by prayerful whispers. A door slammed, a low cry bitten off short, and then silence in the big house, and in the morning Mrs. Jakes with her coffee pot and trivial tinkle of speech and treble armor of practised bearing against the pity of those who knew! The sheer truculence of it held them dumb; it was the courage of a swashbuckler, of a bravo, and it imposed on them the decorum of silence.

The doctor, she gave them to understand, suffered from the climate.

"He never was strong," she would say, with her eyes fixed on the person addressed as though she would challenge him to dispute or question it. "Never! It 's the sun, I think; he suffers from his head, you know. He used to take aspirin for it when we were first married, but it doesn't seem to do him any good now."

The three of them would nod sympathetically and look hastily elsewhere, as though ashamed to be the spectators of her humiliation.

Poor Mrs. Jakes! Seven thousand miles from the streets of Clapham Junction, an exile from the cheeriness and security of its little decent houses, she held yet with a frail hand to the skirts of its beatitude. In the drawer in her bedroom which also contained Jakes' dress suit, she kept in tissue paper and sincere regard a morocco-bound mausoleum of memory – an album. Only two or three times in Mr. Samson's experience – and he had been an inmate of the Sanatorium for four years – had she brought it forth. Once was on the night before young Shaw died, and when no soothing would hold him at peace in his bed, he had lain still to look through those yellowing portraits and hear Mrs. Jakes tell how this one was doing very well as a job-master and that one had turned Papist. But Margaret Harding had seen it. Mrs. Jakes had sat on her bed, quelling Fat Mary with her eye, and

seen her unpack her clothes, the frocks new from dressmakers and tailors in London, the hats of only a month ago. Margaret had been aided in buying them by a philosophic aunt who had recently given up vegetarianism on the advice of her hairdresser. "My child, play light," had been the counsel of this relative. "Don't surprise the natives; they never like it. No frills; a vigorous vicarage style is what you want." And she had brought considerable powers of personality and vocabulary to bear on Margaret's choice, so that in the result there predominated a certain austerity of raiment which Margaret found unexciting. But Mrs. Jakes received them as canons of fashion, screwing up her mouth and nodding gravely as she mastered saliencies.

"I can't quite imagine them in these styles," she said; "the people in the Park, I mean. I suppose it's this golf that's done it."

In return for the exhibition, she had shown Margaret her album. It had many thick pages with beveled gilt edges, each framing from one to six portraits or groups, and she had led her hearer through the lot of them, from the first to the last. They sat side by side on the bed in Mrs. Jakes' room, and the album lay open on their laps, and Mrs. Jakes' finger traveled like a pointer among the pictures while she elucidated them in a voice of quiet pride. These pale and fading faces, fixed to the order of the photographer in more than human smiles, with sleek and decorative hair and a show of clothes so patently reserved for Sundays, were neither pale nor faded for her. She knew the life behind them, their passions and their strength, and spoke of them as she might have spoken had they been waiting in the next room.

"That 's my sister," she said, her finger pausing. "Two years older than me, but she never married. And what she used to suffer from indigestion, words can't tell. And here 's my Aunt Martha – yes, she died seven years ago. My mother's sister, you know. My mother was a Penfold – one of the Penfolds of Putney. You 've heard of them? Ah, and here 's Bill Penfold, my cousin Bill. Poor Bill, he didn't do well, ever. He had a fancy for me, once, or so they said, but my father never could bear him. No harm, you know, no real harm, but larky – sort of. This one? Oh, that 's nobody – a Mr. Wrench, who used to collect for my father; he had a hair-lip. I did n't like him."

The thick page turned, and showed on the other side a single cabinet portrait of a thin woman, with her head a little on one side.

"My mother," said Mrs. Jakes, and shifted the album that Margaret might see better.

"She was a Penfold of Putney," she said, gently. "I think she shows it, you know. A bit quiet and refined, especially about the eyes. Don't you think so?"

It was the picture of the wife of a robust and hardy man, Margaret thought, and as for the eyes and their slight droop, the touch of listlessness which bespeaks an acquired habit of patience and self-suppression, she had only to look up and they returned her look from the face of Mrs. Jakes.

"And this?" she asked.

Mrs. Jakes smiled quite brightly; the photograph was one of a baby.

"That 's little Eustace," she answered, with no trace of the softness of regret which had hushed her tone when she spoke of her mother. "My little baby; he 'd have been a big boy now. He was like his father – very like. Everybody noticed it. And that" – her finger passed on – "is George Penfold, Sergeant-Major in the Guards. His widow married again, a gunner in the Navy."

No sorrow for little Eustace. He, at any rate, would never see his dreams dislimn and fail him; no wife would watch the slow night through for his unsteady step nor read the dishonor written in his eyes. The first of the crosses in the barbed wire enclosure, Mrs. Jakes' empty and aching heart and her quick smile of triumph at his easy victory over all the snares of life – these and the faint, whitening photograph remained of little Eustace. Many a man leaves less when his time comes in South Africa.

"The weather is holding up nicely," she would say at breakfast. "Almost too fine, isn't it? But I suppose we oughtn't complain."

It was a meal over which one lingered, for with the end of it there closed the eventful period of the day. While it lasted, the Sanatorium was at its best; one saw one's fellows in faint hues of

glamour after the night's separation and heard them speak with a sense of receiving news. But the hour exhausted them of interest and one left the table, when all pretexts for remaining there had been expended, to face the emptiness of a morning already stale. That, in truth, was the price one paid for healing, the wearing, smothering monotony of the idle days, when there was nothing to do and one saw oneself a part of the stagnation that ruled the place. Mrs. Jakes withdrew herself to become the motor of the domestic machinery, and till lunch time was not available for countenance and support. Ford occupied himself gravely with his little canvases, plastering upon them strange travesties of landscape, and was busy and intent and impatient of interruption for long periods at a time, while Mr. Samson, keeping a sufficient offing from all human contact, alternately strutted to and fro upon the stoep in a short quarter-deck promenade of ten steps and a right about turn, and lay in a deck chair with a writing case upon his knee and wrote fitfully and with deep thought long, important looking letters which never reached the post.

"You 're feeling the need of something to do," Ford told Margaret, when in desperation she came behind him and watched him modeling – as it seemed – in burnt sienna. "Why don't you knit – or something?"

"Knit?" said Margaret with huge scorn.

"You 'll come to it," he warned her. "There was a chap here before you came who taught himself the harp. A nuisance he was, too, but he said he 'd have been a gibbering idiot without it."

"That was n't saying much, perhaps," retorted Margaret.

"Oh, I don't know. He was a barrister of sorts, I believe. Not many barristers who can play the harp, you know."

"For goodness' sake, don't knead the stuff like that!" cried Margaret, watching his thumb at work. "You 're painting, not – not civil engineering! But what were you?"

"Eh?" He looked up at her.

"Before you had to come here, I mean? Oh, do talk for a minute," she begged.

"Sorry," he said. "I was in the army."

"And was it rather awful to have to give up and nurse yourself?"

"Well!" He glanced at her consideringly, as though to measure her intelligence. "It was rough," he admitted. "You see, the army 's not like barristering, for instance. It 's not a thing you can drop for a bit and then take up again; once you 're out, you 're out for good." He paused. "And I meant it," he added.

"Meant it?"

"Yes, there 's a chance nowadays for a chap with a turn for soldiering. There 's a lot to know, you see, and, well – I was by way of knowing it. That 's all."

He turned to his canvas again, but did not fall to work. Margaret saw his back, thin under his silk coat but flat and trim as a drilled man's should be.

"So for you, it meant the end of everything?" she suggested.

"Looks like it, doesn't it!" he answered. "Still – we 'll see. They trained me and there 's just a chance, in the event of a row, that they might have a use for me. They 'd be short of officers who knew the game. You see – "

He hitched sideways on his camp-stool so that he might make himself clear to her.

"You see, the business of charging at the head of your men is a thing of the past, pretty nearly. All that gallery play is done away with. But take a hundred Tommies and walk 'em about for half a year, dry-nurse 'em, keep them fed and healthy and moderately happy and as clean as you can, be something between an uncle and a schoolmaster to them, and have 'em ready at the end of it to march forty miles in a day and then fight – that's an art in itself! In fact, it's a trade, and it can't be learned in a week."

"I 'm perfectly sure it can't," agreed Margaret.

"Well, that was my trade," said Ford. "That's where I 'll come in when the band begins to play. See?"

He nodded at her expressively but with finality. If was plain that he considered the subject drained dry, and only waited for her to go to return to the mysteries of art.

"Oh, well," sighed Margaret, and left him to it.

Lunch lacked the character of breakfast. For one thing, it was impossible for three feeble people, debarred from exercise, to arrive at a state of appetite during a morning of semi-torpor, with a prospect before them of an afternoon of the same quality. For another, tempers had endured the heat and burden of four hours of enforced idleness and emerged from the test frayed at the edges.

This meant more labor for poor Mrs. Jakes, who could by no means allow the meal to be eaten in a bitter silence, and was driven by a stern sense of duty to keep up a dropping fire of small talk. Their sour faces, the grimness with which they passed the salt, filled her with nervous tremors, and she talked as a born hostess might talk to cover the confusion induced by an earthquake under the table, trembling but fluent to the last. There were times when her small, hesitating voice wrought Margaret up to the very point of flat interventions. At one such moment, it was Ford who saved the situation.

"Miss Harding," he said, in a matter-of-fact way. "You are a pig!"

Mrs. Jakes gasped and bounded in her chair, and old Mr. Samson choked.

"And you," replied Margaret with intensity, "are just a plain beast!"

"That 's the idea," said Ford. "You feel better now?"

"Ever so much better, thank you," answered Margaret. "It was just what I wanted."

Mrs. Jakes was staring at them as though convinced that sudden mania had attacked them both at the same moment.

"It 's all right," Ford assured her. "It's a dodge for blowing off temper. If you 'd just call Mr. Samson something really rude, he 'd be ever so grateful. Call him a Socialist, Mrs. Jakes."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Mrs. Jakes, while Mr. Samson, mastering his emotions, glared and reddened. "You did alarm me," she said. "I thought for a moment – well, I don't know what I did think."

She was distinctly not at her ease for the remainder of the meal, and even at tea that afternoon, she kept an eye on the pair of them. To her mind, they were playing with edged tools.

It was at tea, as a rule, that Dr. Jakes was first visible, very tremulous and thirsty, but always submissive and content to be overlooked and forgotten. At dinner, later on, he would be better and able to talk with a jerky continuity to Margaret who sat at his right hand. He bore himself always with an air of effort, like one who is not at home and whose acquaintance with his fellows is slight, and drank at table nothing but water. His eyes kept the Kafir servants under observation as they waited, and the black boys were full of alacrity in the consciousness that he was watching. "It 's strange," Mrs. Jakes used to say; "Eustace is so quiet, and yet the natives obey him wonderfully." Afterwards, in the drawing-room, he would flicker to and fro restlessly, growing each moment more irritable and incapable of hearing a sentence to the end. Half-way through the evening, he would seize an occasion to escape to his own quarters, and thereafter would be invisible till next day. Every one knew whither he went and for what purpose; eyes met in significant glances as the door closed softly behind him and Mrs. Jakes raised her voice in rapid speech to hide the sound of his tiptoe crossing of the hall; his secret was anybody's and even the Kafirs shared it, and yet the man had the force of mystery. He slid to and fro in the interstices of their lives and came to the surface only to serve and heal them. That done, he dropped back again to the solace that was his behind his locked door, while about him the house slept. He knew himself and yet could look his patients and his wife in the face. Mingled with their contempt and disgust, there was an acknowledgment of the quality of him, of a kind of wry and shabby greatness.

And thus the day came to its end. One by one, Margaret, Ford and Mr. Samson drew off and made their way to the dignified invitation of the big staircase and their rooms. Mrs. Jakes was always at hand to bid them good night, for her day was yet a long way from its finish.

"Tired, my dear?" she would ask Margaret. "It 's been a tiring day; I feel it myself. Good night to you."

In her room, Margaret would find Fat Mary waiting for her, sleepy in her vast, ridiculous way, but still prodigal of smiles, and ready to put her to bed with two left hands equipped with ten thumbs. She had a yawn which would have reminded Jonah of old times, but nothing could damp her helpful ardor, not even being discovered stretched fast asleep on Margaret's bed and being waked with the bath sponge. She made it clear that she would stop at few things to be of service.

"Missis not sleepy? Ah!" She stood in thought for five seconds. "Me nurse Missis, all same baby? Plenty strong – me!"

She dandled an imaginary child in her great arms, smiling cheerfully but quite in earnest. "Plenty strong," she assured the young lady from Kensington. "No? No? All a-right!"

Darkness at last, and the window wide to the small, whispering winds which people the veld at night! A sky of blue-black powdered with misty white stars, and from the distance, squeaks, small cries, the wary voice of the wilderness! Sometimes a jackal would range within earshot and lift up his voice under the stars to cry like a child, in the very accent of heartbroken, helpless woe. The nightly traffic of the veld was in full swing ere her eyes closed and its subdued clamor followed her into her dreams.

Silence in the big house and along the matted corridors – and one voice, speaking guardedly, in the hall. It never happened to Margaret to hear it and go to the stair-head and look down. Thence she might have seen what would have made her less happy – Mrs. Jakes on her knees at the locked door of the study, with her candle set on the floor beside her, casting a monstrous shadow-caricature of her upon the gray stone wall. In her sober black dress she knelt on the mat and her small, kitchen-reddened hands tapped gently, carefully on the panels. She spoke through the keyhole and her fruitless whisperings rustled in light echoes about the high ceiling.

"Eustace, it's me. Eustace! I 'm so tired, Eustace. Please open the door. Please, Eustace! It 's only me, dear."

CHAPTER V

"Hardly smart," pronounced Mrs. du Preez, speaking low into Mrs. Jakes' ear. "Smart 's not the word I 'd use for her myself. *Distangay*, now, or *chic*, if you understand what that means!"

"Oh, quite!" replied Mrs. Jakes coldly.

They were seated side by side upon the sofa in the little parlor of the farm; its dimensions made it impossible for Mrs. Jakes to treat her hostess as distantly as she could have wished. There was nothing for it but to leave her ear and her unresponsive profile, composed to a steadfast woodenness, to the mercy of those critical and authoritative whispers until deliverance should offer itself. She settled her small black-gowned figure and coughed behind three gloved fingers.

Near the window looking forth across the kraals, Margaret Harding, the subject of Mrs. du Preez's comments, had the gaunt Boer for a companion. This was her visit of ceremony, her "return call"; two or three earlier visits, mere incidents of morning walks, when she had stopped to talk to Paul and been surprised and captured by Paul's mother, were understood not to count, and the Recording Angel would omit them from his notes. Mrs. du Preez had taken the initiative in due order by appearing at the Sanatorium one afternoon at tea-time; she had asked Dr. Jakes if he had "a mouth on him" and Margaret if there were many people in town. The next step in the transaction was for Margaret to put on a real frock and a real hat, and take herself and her card-case through the white, scornful sunshine to the farm; and behold! by virtue of this solemnity, two women marooned at the heart of an ocean of sun-swamped desert had license to distinguish one another from common objects of the country side.

Even Mrs. Jakes, whose attitude towards Mrs. du Preez was one of disapproval tempered by dread, could see no alternative to this course. She shook her head at Margaret's amusement.

"This is not London, of course," she said reasonably. "I know that. But, my dear, we 're Christian people – even here."

At Margaret's side, the tall Boer, Christian du Preez, leaned against the wall and regarded her with shy, intent eyes that were oddly like Paul's. There was lacking in him that aloof and almost reverent quality of the boy which made him seem as though he regarded all things with an equal wonder and an equal kinship; he was altogether harder and more immediately forceful, a figure at home in his narrow world; but the relationship between him and his son was obvious. Margaret had only to glance across the room to where Paul sat by the door, following the trickle of conversation around the room from face to face with his eyes, to see the resemblance. What was common to them both was a certain shadowy reserve, a character of relationship to the dumbness and significance of the Karoo, and something else which had the gloom of melancholy and the power of pride. In each of them the Boer, the world's disinherited son, was salient.

Mrs. du Preez had secured his presence to grace the occasion after some resistance on his part, for he entered the parlor seldom and was not at his ease there. Its atmosphere of indoor formality daunted and oppressed him, and he felt coarse and earth-stained under the eyes of the serene young men who watched him from their plush and fret-work frames. He had nothing to set against their sleek beauty and their calm sophistication but his fathom and odd inches of lean, slow-moving strength, his eyes of patient expectancy and the wild beard that redeemed his countenance from mildness. He had come under protest and for the sake of peace, and sat scowling in a chair, raw with shyness and irritation, in the dreadful interval between the completion of Mrs. du Preez's preparations and the arrival of the guests, while in face of him "yours blithely, Boy Bailey," set him a hopeless example of iron-clad complacency.

Then came Margaret and Mrs. Jakes, and at the first sign of them he was screened as in a cloud by the welcome of Mrs. du Preez. Their step upon the threshold was her cue for a cordiality of greeting that filled the room and overflowed into the passage in a rapid crescendo of compliment, inquiries

as to health, laughter and mere bustle; it was like the entrance of two star performers supported by a full chorus and *corps de ballet*.

"So here you are, the two of you," was her style. "On time to a tick, too! Come right in, Miss Harding, and look out for that step – it 's a terror. A death-trap, *I* call it! And you, Mrs. Jakes. I won't say I 'm glad to see you, 'cause you 'll believe that without me telling you. You found it pretty hot walking, I know; we 're all pretty warm members in this community, aren't we? Sit down, sit down; no extra charge for sitting down, y'know. And now, how are you? Sitting up and taking nourishment, eh? That's the style!"

Margaret was aware, across her shoulder, of a gloomy male presence inhabiting the background.

"Let me introduce my husband," said Mrs. du Preez, following her glance. "Christian, this is Miss Harding. And now, Mrs. Jakes, let you an' me have a sit-down over here. You first – age before innocence, y'know. And how 's the poor old doctor?"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Jakes firmly, "he is quite well."

She smiled graciously at Paul, who was watching her, and took her seat, resigned to martyrdom.

Christian du Preez gave the girl a slack hand and murmured incoherently some salutation, while his gaze took in avidly each feature of her and summed up her effect of easy modernity. He recognized in her a certain feminine quality for which he had no name. Once before he had glimpsed it as in a revelation, when, as a youth newly returned from service on commando against rebellious Kafirs, he had spent an evening in a small town and there seen a performance by a traveling theatrical company. It was a crude and ill-devised show, full of improbable murders that affronted the common-sense of a man fresh from various killings; but in an interval between slaughters, there was a scene that brought upon the stage a slim girl who walked erect and smiled and shrugged easily at the audience. Her part was brief; she was not visible for more than a few minutes, and assuredly her shaft, so soon sped, struck no one else. It needed a Boer, with his feet in the mud and his head among the stars, to clothe her with dignity as with a robe and add to her valuation of herself the riches of his woman-haunted imagination. She passed from sight again, and for the time he scarcely regretted her, for she left glamour behind her and a vision of womanhood equipped, debonnaire, heart-breaking in its fragility and its daring.

The outcome of that revelation was marriage within the week; but it never revisited the bored and weary woman whom Christian du Preez had brought home to his farm and its solitudes. It was as though he had tried to pick an image from still water; the fruit of that endeavor was memory and an empty hand. Even as he greeted Margaret he turned slowly and looked from her to his wife in unconscious comparison, and turned as unconsciously back again. Only Mrs. du Preez knew the meaning of that glance; she answered it with an obstinate compression of the mouth and went on talking to Mrs. Jakes about the hang of Margaret's skirt.

"It 's all right for her," she was saying. "These leggy ones can wear anything. But think how you 'd look in it, for instance. Why you 'd make a horse laugh!"

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Jakes, unhappy but bristling. She never grew reconciled to Mrs. du Preez's habit of using her as a horrible example.

"You would that," Mrs. du Preez assured her. "You see, my dear, yours is an elderly style."

At the window, Margaret was doing what she could to thaw the tall Boer into talk, and meeting with some success. He liked, while possibly he did not quite understand, her relish for the view from the window, with the rude circles of the kraals near at hand, the scattered huts of the farm Kafirs beyond them, and the all-subduing brown of the Karoo slipping forth to the edge of the sky. He had once heard a young man from the Sanatorium agree with Mrs. du Preez that the Karoo resembled a brick-field established in a cemetery. Margaret did better than that.

"I suppose you 've traveled all over it?" she asked him.

"When I was a young man, I rode transport," he answered. "Then I traveled; now I sit still in the middle of it and try to grow wool."

"Is it all like this?" she asked.

"Sometimes there is grass – a little – not much, and milk bushes and prickly pear," he told her. "But it is hard ground, all of it. It is very peaceful, though."

She nodded comprehendingly, and he found a stimulant in her quiet interest. He had not Paul's tense absorption in the harvest of the eye, but he would have been no Boer had the vacant miles not exercised a power over him.

"You 're never – discontented with it?" asked Margaret. "I mean, you find it enough for you, without wanting towns and all that?"

He shook his head, hesitating. "I do not know towns," he answered. "No, I don't want towns. But – every day the same sights, and the sun and the silence – "

"Yes?" she asked.

He was little used to confessing himself and his shyness was an obstacle to clear speech. Besides, the matter in his mind was not clear to himself; he was aware of it as a color to his thoughts rather than as a fact to be stated.

"It makes you guess at things," he said at last. "You guess, but you don't ever know."

"What things?" asked Margaret.

"A lot of things," he answered. "God, and the devil, and all that. It's always there, you see, and you must think."

A rattle in the passage and a start from Mrs. du Preez heralded tea, borne in upon a reverberating iron tray by a timid and clumsy Kafir maid, who set her burden insecurely upon the table and fled in panic. Christian du Preez ceased to speak as if upon a signal and Mrs. du Preez entered the arena hospitably.

"You 're sure you wouldn't rather have something else?" she asked Margaret, as she filled the cups. "There 's afternoons when a whisky-and-soda is more in my line than tea. Sure you won't? P'r'aps Mrs. Jakes will, then? We won't tell, will we, Paul? Well, 'ave it your own way, only don't blame me! Christian, reach this cup to Miss Harding."

The tall man did as he was bidden, ignoring Mrs. Jakes. In his world, women helped themselves. Paul carried her cup to Mrs. Jakes and sat down beside her in the place vacated by his mother. From there, he could see Margaret and look through the window as well.

"If you 'll have one, I 'll keep you company," suggested Mrs. du Preez privately to Mrs. Jakes.

"One what?" inquired Mrs. Jakes across her cup. The poor lady was feeling very grateful for the strong tea to console her nerves.

"One what!" Mrs. du Preez was scornful. "A drink, of course – a drink out of a glass!"

"No, thank you," replied Mrs. Jakes hastily. "I never touch stimulants."

"Oh, well!" Mrs. du Preez resigned herself to circumstances. "I suppose," she enquired, nodding towards Margaret, "*she* don't either?"

"I believe not," replied Mrs. Jakes.

Mrs. du Preez considered the matter. "You 'd think they 'd grow out of it," she observed enigmatically. "She seems to be lively enough, too, in her way. First person I ever saw who could make Christian talk."

Christian was talking at last. Margaret had paused to watch a string of natives pass in single-file, after the unsociable Kafir fashion, before the window, going towards the huts, with the sun-gilt dust rising about them in a faint haze. They were going home after their day's work, and she wondered suddenly to what secret joy of freedom they re-entered when the hours of the white man's dominion were over and the coming of night made a black world for the habitation of black men.

"I suppose there is no knowing what they really feel and think?" she suggested.

That is the South African view, the white man's surrender to the impregnable reserve of the black races; native opinion is only to be gathered when the native breaks bounds. Christian du Preez nodded.

"No," he agreed. "I have always been among them, and I have fought them, too; but what they think they don't tell."

"You have fought them? How was that?"

"When I was young. On commando," he explained, with his eyes on her. It was luxury to see the animation of her pale, clear-cut face as she looked up and waited for him to go on.

"It was a real war," he answered her. "A real war. There was a chief – Kamis, they called him – down there in the south, and his men murdered an officer. So the government called out the burghers and sent Cape Mounted Rifles with us to go and punish him. I was twenty years old then, and I went too."

In the background Mrs. du Preez sniffed. "He 's telling her about that old Kafir war of his," she said. "He always tells that to young women. I know him!"

Christian went on, lapsing as he continued from the careful English he had spoken hitherto to the cruder vernacular of the Cape. He told of the marching and the quick, shattering attack against Kafirs at bay in the low hills bordering the Karoo, of a fight at night in a rain-squall, when the "pot-leg," the Kafir bullets hammered out of cold iron, sang in the air like flutes and made a wound when they struck that a man could put his fist into. His eyes shone with the fires of warm remembrance as he told of that advance over grass-grown slopes slippery with wet, when the gay desperadoes of the Cape Mounted Rifles went up singing, "Jinny, my own true loved one, Wait till the clouds roll by," and on their flank the burghers found cover and lit the night with the flashes of their musketry. It was an epic woven into the fiber of the narrator's soul, a thing lived poignantly, each moment of it flavored on the palate and the taste remembered. He had been in the final breathless rush that broke the Kafirs and sent them scuttling like rock-rabbits – "dassies," he called them – through the rocks to the kopje-ringed hollow where they would be held till morning.

And then that morning!

"Man, it was cold," he said. "There was no fires. We were lying in the bushes with our rifles under our bellies till coffee-time, and that Lascelles, our general, walked up and down behind us all the night. He was a little old soldier-officer from Capetown; his face was red and his mustache was white. The rain was falling on my back all the time, but sometimes I slept a little. And when it was sun-up, I could see down the krantz to the veld below, and there was all the Kafirs together, all in a bunch, in the middle of it. They didn't look much; I was surprised to see so few. They were standing and lying on the wet grass, and they seemed tired. Some were sleeping, even, stretched out like dead men below us, but what made me sorry for them was, they were so few.

"I was sorry," he added, thoughtfully.

Margaret nodded.

"But it was a real war," he assured her quickly. "When the sun was well up, we moved, and presently all the burghers were lying close together with our rifles ready. It was Lascelles that ordered it. I didn't understand, then, for I knew a beaten Kafir when I saw one, and those below were beaten to the ground. By and by the Cape Mounted Rifles went past behind us, and dipped down into a hollow on our right; we had only to wait, and it was very cold. I was wondering when they would let us make coffee and talking to the next man about it, when from our right, so sudden that I jumped up at the sound of it, the Cape Mounted Rifles fired at the Kafirs down below. Man, that was awful! It was like a thunder on a clear day. All of us were surprised, and some called out and swore and said Lascelles was a fool. But it was queer, all the same, to see the Kafirs. Twenty of them was killed, and one of them had a bullet in his stomach and rolled about making screams like laughing. The rest – they didn't move; they didn't run; they didn't cry out. A few looked up at us; I tell you, it was near enough to see their white eyes; but the others just stopped as they were. They was like cattle, like sick cattle, patient and weak and finished; the Cape Mounted Rifles could have killed them all and they wouldn't have lifted their hands.

"Our commandant – Van Zyl, he was called, a very fat man – clicked with his tongue. 'Wasting them,' he said. 'Wasting them!'

"Then we went down the hill and came all round them, standing among the dead bodies, and Lascelles with his interpreter and his two young officers in tight belts went forward to look for Kamis, the chief. The interpreter – he was a yellow-faced Hollander – called out once, and in the middle of the Kafirs there stood up an old Kafir with a blanket on his shoulders and his wool all gray. He came walking through the others with a little black boy, three or four years old, holding by his hand and making big round eyes at us. It was the son that was left to him; the others, we found out, were all killed. He was an old man and walked bent and held the blanket round him with one hand. He looked to me like a good old woman who ought to have been sitting in a chair in a kitchen.

"'Are you Kamis?' they asked him.

"'I am Kamis,' he said, 'and this is my son who is also Kamis.'

"He showed them the little plump piccanin, who hung back and struggled. One of the young officers with tight belts put an eye-glass in his eye and laughed. Lascelles did not laugh. He was a little man, as neat as a lady, with ugly, narrow eyes.

"'Tell him he 's to be hanged,' he ordered.

"Old Kamis heard it without a sign, only nodding as the interpreter translated it to him.

"'And what will they do to my son?' he asked.

"Lascelles snuffled in his nose angrily. 'The Government will take care of his son,' he said, and turned away. But when he had gone a few steps he turned back again. 'Tell the old chap,' he ordered, 'and tell him plainly, that his son will be taken care of. He 'll be all right, he 'll be well looked after. Savvy?' he shouted to Kamis. 'Piccanin all right; plenty *skoff*, plenty *mahli*, plenty everything.'

"The Hollander told the old chief while Lascelles waited, and the men of the Cape Mounted Rifles who had the handcuffs for him stood on each side. Kamis heard it with his head on one side, as if he was a bit deaf. Then he nodded and put out his hands for the irons.

"Lascelles held out his hands to the baby Kafir.

"'Come with me, kid!' he said.

"The baby hung back. He was scared. Old Kamis said something to him and pushed him with his knee, and at last the child went and took Lascelles' hand.

"'That 's it,' said Lascelles, and lifted him up. As he carried him away, I heard him talking to the young officer with the eye-glass. 'That 's a damned silly grin you 've got, Whitburn,' he said, 'and you may as well know I 'm sick of it.'

"I think he was a bit ashamed of carrying the baby. He had n't any of his own. I saw his wife later, when we were disbanded – a skinny, yellow woman who played cards every evening.

"And then, at Fereira, they hanged old Kamis, while we all stood round with our rifles resting on the ground. There was a man to hang him who wore a mask, and I was sorry about the mask, because I thought I might meet him sometime and not know him and be friends with him. He had red hair though; his mask couldn't hide that, and there is something about red hair that turns me cold. There were about fifty of his tribe who were brought there to see the end of Kamis and take warning by him, and when he came out of the jail door, between two men, with his hands tied behind him, they all lifted a hand above their heads to salute him. The men on each side of him held him by the elbows and hurried him along. They took him so fast that he tripped his foot and nearly fell. 'Slower, you swine!' said Lascelles, who was there with a sword on. He walked across and spoke to Kamis. 'Piccanin all right!' he said, 'All-a right!' said Kamis, and then they led him up the steps. They were all about him there, the jail men and the man with the mask; for a minute I couldn't see him at all. Then they were away from him, and there was a bag on his head and the rope was round his neck. The man with the mask seemed to be waiting, and at last Lascelles lifted his hand in a tired way and there was a crash of falling planks and a cry from the Kafirs, and old Kamis, as straight and lean as a young man, was hanging under the platform just above the ground and swinging a little."

Christian du Preez frowned and looked at Margaret absently.

"And then I was sick," he said reflectively. "Quite sick!"

"I don't wonder," said Margaret. "But the baby! What happened to the Kafir baby?"

"I didn't see the baby any more," replied the Boer. "But I read in a newspaper that they sent it to England. Perhaps it died."

"But why send it to England?" asked Margaret. "What could it do there?"

Christian du Preez shrugged one shoulder. "The Government sent it," he replied, conclusively. No Boer attempts to explain a government; it is his eternal unaccountable. "You see it was the Chief, that baby was, so they wanted to send it a long way off, perhaps."

"And now, I suppose it 's a man," said Margaret; "a poor negro all alone in London, who has forgotten his own tongue. He wears shabby clothes and makes friends with servant girls, and never remembers how he held his father's hand while you burghers and the soldiers came down the hillside. Don't you think that's sad?"

"Yes," said the Boer thoughtfully, but without alacrity, for after all a Kafir is a Kafir and his place in the sympathies of his betters is a small one. "Kafirs look ugly in clothes," he added after a moment.

At the other side of the room, the others had ceased their talk to listen. Mrs. du Preez laughed a little harshly.

"They 're worse in boots," she volunteered. "Ever seen a nigger with boots on, Miss Harding? He walks as if his feet weighed a ton. Make a clatter like clog-dancin'. But round here, of course, there 's no boots for them to get."

"There 's one now," said Margaret. "Look – he 's passing the kraals. He 's got boots on."

They all looked with a quick curiosity that was a little strange to see; one would have thought a passing Kafir would scarcely have interested them by any eccentricity of attire. Even Mrs. Jakes rose from her place on the sofa and stood on tip-toe to see over Mrs. du Preez's shoulders. There is an instinct in the South African which makes him conscious, in his dim, short-sighted way, that over against him there looms the passive, irreconcilable power of the black races. He is like a man carrying a lantern, with the shifting circle of light about him, and at its frontier the darkness pregnant with presences.

The Boer, learned in Kafir varieties, stared under puckered brows at the single figure passing below the kraals. He marked not so much any unusual feature in it as the absence of things that were usual.

"Paul," he said, "go an' see what he 's after."

Paul was already at the door, going out silently. He paused to nod.

"I 'm going now," he said.

"Strange Kafirs want lookin' after," explained Mrs. du Preez to Margaret as the boy passed the window outside. "You never know what they 're up to. Hang out your wash when they 're around and you 're short of linen before you know where you are, and there 's a nigger on the trek somewhere in a frilled petticoat or a table-cloth. They don't care what it is; anything 'll do for them. Why, last year one of 'em sneaked a skirt off Mrs. Jakes here. Didn't he, now?"

"It was a very good skirt," said Mrs. Jakes, flushing. "A very good one – not even turned."

"Well, he was in luck, then," said Mrs. du Preez. "And what he looks like in it – well, I give it up! Miss Harding, you ain't going yet, surely?"

"I 'm afraid *I* must," put in Mrs. Jakes, seizing her opportunity. "I have to see about dinner."

They shook hands all round. "You must all come up to tea with me some afternoon soon," suggested Margaret. "You will come, won't you?"

"Will a duck swim?" inquired Mrs. du Preez, genially. "You just try us, Miss Harding. And oh! if you want to say good-by to Paul, I know where he 's gone. He 'll be down under the dam, makin' mud pies."

"Not really?"

"You just step down and see; it won't take you a moment. He makes things, y'know; he made a sort of statue of me once. 'If that 's like me,' I told him, 'it 's lucky I 'm off the stage.' And what d 'you think he had the cheek to answer me? 'Mother,' he says, 'when you forget what you look like, you look like this.'"

"I think I will just say good-by to Paul," said Margaret, glancing at Mrs. Jakes.

"Come on after me, then," answered the doctor's wife. "I really must fly."

"Pigs might fly," suggested Mrs. du Preez, enigmatically.

The Boer did not go to the door with them; he waited where he stood while Mrs. du Preez, her voice waxing through the leave-takings to a shrill climax of farewell, accompanied them to her borders. When she returned to the little room, he was still standing in his place, returning "Boy Bailey's" glazed stare with gloomy intensity.

His wife looked curiously at him as she moved to the table and began to put the scattered tea-cups together on the tray.

"She 's a nice girl, Christian," she said, as she gathered them up.

He did not answer, though he heard. She went on with her work till the tray was ready to be carried forth, glancing at his brooding face under her eyebrows.

"Christian," she said suddenly. "I remember when you told me about the war and the Kafir baby."

He gave her an absent look. "You said, 'Hang the Kafir baby!'" he answered.

He turned from her, with a last resentful glare at the plump perfection of Boy Bailey, and slouched heavily from the room. Mrs. du Preez, with a pursed mouth, watched him go in silence.

Mrs. Jakes was resolute in her homeward intentions; she had a presentiment of trouble in the kitchen which turned out to be well grounded. So Margaret went alone along the narrow rut of a path which ran down towards the shining water of the dam, which the slanting sun transmuted to a bath of gold. She was glad of the open air again, after Mrs. du Preez's carefully guarded breathing-mixture with its faint odor of furniture polish and horsehair. Paul, by the way, knew that elusive fragrance as the breath of polite life; it belonged to the parlor, where his father might not smoke, and to nowhere else, and its usual effect was to rarefy human intercourse to the point of inanity. In the parlor, one spoke in low tones and dared not clear one's throat and felt like an abortion and a monstrosity. Years afterwards, when the doors of the world had been forced and it had turned out to be a smallish place, only passably upholstered, it needed but a sniff of that odor to make his hands suddenly vast and unwieldy and reduce him to silence and discomfort.

The path skirted the dam, at the edge of which grew rank grass, and dipped to turn the corner of the sloping wall of earth and stones at its deeper end. As she went, she stooped to pick up a fragment of sun-dried clay that caught her eye; it had been part of a face, and on it the mouth still curved. It was rudely done, but it was there, and it had, even the broken fragment that lacked the interpretation of its context, some touch of free vigor that arrested her in the act of letting it drop. She went on carrying it in her hand, and at the corner of the wall stopped again at the sound of voices. Some one was talking only twenty paces away, hidden from her by the bulk of the wall.

"You must shape it in the lump," she heard. "You must go for the mass. That's everything – the mass! Do you see what I mean?"

She knew the tones, the clear modulations of the pundit-speech which belonged to her class, but there was another quality in the voice that was only vaguely familiar to her, which she could not identify. It brought to her mind, by some unconscious association, the lumbering gaiety of Fat Mary.

"Ye-es," very slowly. That was Paul's voice answering. "Yes. Like you see it in the distance."

"That 's it," the baffling voice spoke again. "That 's it exactly. And work the clay like this, without breaking it, smoothly."

She still held the broken fragment in her hand as she stepped round the corner of the wall to look. Paul, sitting cross-legged on the ground, had his back to her, and facing him, with a lump of red clay between his hands, which moved upon it deliberately, molding it with care, sat a Kafir. He was intent upon his work, and the brim of his hat, overhanging his eyes, prevented him from seeing her arrival. She stood for a moment watching; the two of them made a still group to which all the western sky and the wide land were a background. And then the clay fragment dropped from her hand, hit on a stone underfoot and cracked into pieces that dissolved the dumb curve of the mouth in ruin.

At the little noise it made, Paul turned sharply and the Kafir raised his head and looked at her. There was an instant of puzzled staring and then the Kafir lifted his hat to her.

"I 'll be going," he said, and began to rise to his feet.

"Don't," said Paul. "Don't go." He was looking at the girl expectantly, waiting for her to justify herself. Now was the time to confirm his faith in her. "Don't go," he repeated. "It's Miss Harding that I told you about." He hesitated a moment, and now his eyes appealed to her. "She 's from London," he said; "she 'll understand."

The Kafir waited, standing up, a slender, upright young man in worn discolored clothes. To Margaret then, as to Paul in his first encounter with him at the station, there was a shock in the pitiful, gross negro face that went with the pleasant, cultivated voice. It added something slavish to his travel-stained appearance that touched the girl's quick pity.

She stepped forward impulsively.

"Please don't go," she begged, "I should be so sorry. And Paul will introduce us."

He smiled. "It shall be as you like, of course," he answered. "Will you sit down? The grass is always dry here."

He made an oddly conventional gesture, as though the slope of the dam wall were a chair and he were going to place it for her.

"Oh, thanks," said Margaret, and sat down.

CHAPTER VI

The Kafir seated himself again in his old place and let his hand fall upon the mass of clay which he had been fashioning for Paul's instruction. He was the least perturbed of the three of them. He sank his finger-tops in the soft plasticity of the stuff, and smiled across it at the others, at the boy, embarrassed and not sure of Margaret yet, and at her, still mastered by her curiosity. It was almost as if he were used to being regarded with astonishment, and his self-possession had a touch of that deliberate lime-lit quality which distinguishes the private lives of preachers and actors and hunchbacks.

For the rest, he seemed to be about Margaret's age, clean run and of the middle stature. Watching him, Margaret was at a loss to discover what it was about him that seemed so oddly commonplace and familiar till she noted his clothes. They were "tweeds." Though he had apparently slept on the bare ground in them and made them a buffer between his skin and many emergencies of travel, they were still tweeds, such as any sprightly youth of Bayswater might affect for a week-end in the country.

It needed only a complexion and an attitude to render him inconspicuous on a golf-course, but in that place, under the majestic sun, with the heat-dazzle of the Karoo at his back, his very clothes made him the more incomprehensible.

Margaret realized that he was waiting for her to speak.

"You model, then?" she asked, striving to speak in an altogether matter-of-fact tone, as though to come across gifted, English-speaking negroes, giving art lessons in odd corners, were nothing unusual.

"Just a little," he answered. "Enough to help Paul to make a beginning. Eh, Paul?"

Paul nodded, turning to Margaret. "He knows lots," he said. "*He 's* been in London, too. It was there he learned to – to model."

Paul had a way of uttering the word "London" which conveyed to Margaret's ready sympathies some little part of what it meant to him, the bright unattainable home of wonderful activities, the land of heart's desire.

"In London?" She turned to the Kafir, "London seems a long way from here, doesn't it?"

"Yes; a long way." He was not smiling now. "It is seven months since I left London," he said; "and already it seems dim and unreal. It's as if I 'd dreamed about it and only remembered parts of my dream."

Paul was listening with that profound attention he seemed to give to all things.

"I don't feel it 's as far as all that," said Margaret. "But then, I was there two months ago. Probably that makes a difference."

She was only now beginning to realize the strangeness of the encounter, and as she talked her faculties, taken by ambush and startled from their functions, regained their alertness. She watched him composedly as he replied.

"Yes," he said. "And there are other differences, too. Since I left London I have not slept under a roof."

While he spoke he did not cease to finger the clay; as he turned it here and there, Margaret was able to see it was the head of a negro that he was shaping and the work was already well forward. It was, indeed, the same head whose unexpected scowl had astonished Paul; and as he moved it about, the still gloomy face of clay seemed to glance backward and forward as though it heard him and doubted.

"But why not?" demanded Margaret.

He seemed to hesitate before answering, and meanwhile his hands were busy and deft.

"Why not?" she repeated. "Seven months! I don't understand. Why have n't you slept under a roof all that time?"

"Well!" He smiled as he spoke at last. "You see – I don't speak Kafir. That's where the trouble is. When first I came up here, I went across to the southern districts, where Kafirs are pretty numerous. My idea was to live among them, in order to – well, to carry out an idea of mine."

He paused. "They didn't know what to make of you?" suggested Margaret.

"No – unless it was a corpse," he answered. "I don't really blame them; they must have been horribly suspicious of me. At the first kraal I came to – the first village, that is – I tried to make myself known to a splendid old chap, sitting over a little fire, who seemed to be in charge. That was awfully queer. Every man, woman and child in the place stood round and stared and made noises of distrust – that's what they sounded like; and the old chap just squatted in the middle and blinked up at me without a word. I 'd heard that most of the Kafirs about here could understand a little English, so I just talked away and tried to look innocent and useful and I hoped I was making the right impression. The chap listened profoundly till I had quite done, looking as though he were taking in every word of it. Then he lifted both arms, with exactly the movement of a cock when it 's going to crow, and two young fellows behind him leaned down and took hold of them and helped him very slowly to his feet. I made sure I 'd done the trick and that he was getting up to shake hands or something. But instead of that he groped about with his right hand in a blind, helpless kind of way, till one of his private secretaries put a knobherry, a bludgeon with a knob on the end, into it. And then, the poor old thing who had to be helped to his feet took one quick step in my direction and landed me a bang on the head with the club. I just remember that all the others burst into screams of laughter; I must have heard them as I went down."

"What a horrible thing!" exclaimed Margaret.

He smiled again, his teeth flashing brilliantly in his black face.

"It was awkward at the time," he admitted. "I came to later on the veld where they dragged me, with a lump on my head the size of my fist. And sore – by Jove! I was sore. Still, it's just possible I might have gone back for another try, if the first thing I saw hadn't been a tall black gentleman sitting at the entrance to the kraal with an assegai – a spear, that is – ready for me. I concluded it was n't good enough!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.