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The Kopje Garrison: A Story of the Boer War

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
How Drew Lennox and Bob Dickenson went a-Fishing

They did not look like fishermen, those two young men in khaki, for people do not generally go fishing with magazine-rifles instead of fishing-rods – certainly not in England. But this was in South Africa, and that makes all the difference. In addition, they were fishing in a South African river, where both of them were in profound ignorance as to what might take their bait first; and they were talking about this when they first reached the bank and saw the swift river flowing onward – a lovely river whose banks were like cliffs, consequent upon ages of the swift stream cutting its way downward through the soft earth, while here and there clumps of trees grew luxuriantly green, and refreshed the eyes of the lookers-on after a couple of months spent in riding over the drab and dreary veldt.

"Tackle isn't half strong enough," said the younger of the

two, who was nearly good-looking; in fact, he would have been handsome if he had not always worn so stupid an aspect. “Think there are any crocodiles here?”

“Likely enough, Bobby.”

“S’pose one of them takes the bait?”

“Well, suppose he does!” said the other, who resembled his companion, minus the stupid look; for if the keen, dark-grey eyes were truth-tellers of what was behind them, he was, as the men in his company said, sharp as a needle.

“S’pose he does!” said the young man addressed as Bobby – otherwise Robert Dickenson, second lieutenant in Her Majesty’s – th Mounted Infantry. “Well, that’s a cool way of talking. Suppose he does! Why, suppose one of the great magnified efts swallows the bait?”

“Suppose he does. What then?”

“Why, he’ll be more likely to pull me in than let me pull him out.”

“No doubt about it, if the line doesn’t break.”

“What should I do then, Drew, old man?”

“I don’t know what you’d do, my little man. I know what I should do.”

“Yes. What?”

“Let go.”

“Ah, I didn’t think of that,” said the young officer quite calmly. “I say, though, if it turned out to be a hippopotamus?”

“I wish it would, Bobby – that is, so long as it was a nice

fat calf. I'm so ragingly hungry that I should look upon a steak off one of those india-rubber gentlemen as the greatest delicacy under the sun."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense. One of those things wouldn't be likely to bite. But I say, Drew, old chap, do you think there are any fish to be caught?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, Bobby. But here's a river; it looks likely. Fishes live in rivers; why shouldn't they be here?"

"To be sure; why not?" said the other, brightening up and looking better. "Who knows? There may be carp and tench, eels and pike."

"Not likely, Bobby, my lad; but most probably there are fish of some kind, such as live on this side of the equator."

"Mahseer, perhaps – eh?"

"Bah! This is Africa, not northern India. Let's get down and make a beginning. We had better get down through that woody rift."

"I wish I'd got my six-jointed rod, old fellow."

"But as you haven't, we must try what we can do with a line."

"I say, it was lucky you thought to bring some hooks."

"They were meant to try in the sea, old fellow, but I never had a chance. Come softly, and be on the lookout."

"Eh?" cried the young man addressed, bringing the rifle he carried to the ready. "Boers?"

"Oh no; our fellows are not likely to let any of those gentlemen approach. I thought we might perhaps put up a deer, antelope,

buck, or something."

"Venison roast, hot, juicy! Oh Drew, old man, don't; pray don't! You gave me such an awful pang. Oh dear! oh dear!"

"Pst! Quiet! Don't build your hopes on anything, because I dare say we shall be disappointed; but still we might."

"Ah, might!" said the young officer. "Oh dear! I thought we might get wounded, or have a touch of fever, but I never expected that we should run the risk of being starved to death."

"Then give us a chance of escaping that fate by keeping your tongue quiet. If we don't get a shot at something down there, we may still hit upon a bag of fish."

"Forward!" whispered the young officer, and together the pair approached the wooded gully and cautiously began to descend it to reach the river; but all proved to be silent, and in spite of their caution not a bush rustled, and their patient movements were in vain.

"I did expect a shot at something," said the elder officer in a disappointed tone.

"Venison was too much," said Bobby. "I expected it would be a sneaking leopard, or one of those doggy-looking monkeys."

"The baboons? Oh no; they'd be among the rocky hills. But you need not be surprised, for this is the land of disappointments."

"Oh, I say, don't talk like that, Drew, old chap," said the younger officer. "Fishermen have bad luck enough always, without your prophesying ill before we begin."

"One can't help it out here. Hang it all! we've had nothing but misfortunes ever since we came. Now then, you sit down on that rock, and I'll sit on this."

"Why not keep close together?"

"Because if we do we shall be getting our lines tangled."

"Of course; I forgot that. Here, you'll want some bait."

The speaker took a small tin canister from his pocket, unscrewed the lid, and made by the help of his pocket-knife a fair division of some nasty, sticky-looking paste, which looked as if it would soon wash off the hook upon which it was placed; and then the two fishermen separated and took up their stations about fifty yards apart, the two stones standing well out in the rapid current which washed around them and proved advantageous, from the fact that they had only to drop the baited hook into the water at their feet, when the swift stream bore it outward and away, the fishers merely having to let out line and wait, watchful and patient, for a bite.

It was very calm and beautiful in the bend of the river that they had chosen. There was a faint breeze, apparently caused by the rush of the stream, whose rippling amongst the stones with which the shore beneath the cliff-like bank was strewed made pleasant music; and as soon as the whole of the line was paid out the two young men sat silent and watchful, waiting for the tug which should tell that there was a fish at work. But a good ten minutes elapsed, and there was no sign.

"Humph!" grunted Dickenson, after his patience was

exhausted. “No mistake about there being fish here.”

“How do you know?”

“One of them has taken my bait.”

It was on Drew’s lips to say, “Washed off by the stream;” but he remained silent as he softly pulled in his own line, to find nothing but the bare hook.

“There! do you see?” he said softly, the sound of his voice passing over the water so that it was like a whisper at his friend’s ear, as he dangled the bare hook.

“Oh yes, I see: fish nibbled it off.”

“Hope you are right,” said Drew softly, as he rebaited, dropped in the white marble of paste, and watched it glide down the stream, drawing out one by one the rings of line which he had carefully coiled up on the rock when he drew it out.

Then stooping and picking a long, heavy, stream-washed, slaty fragment from out of the water by his side, he made the end of his line fast to it and laid it at his feet, so as to have his hands at liberty. With these he drew out a cigarette-case and opened it, but his brow puckered up as he looked disconsolately at its contents.

“The last two,” he said softly. “Better keep ’em. Be more hungry perhaps by-and-by.”

Closing the case, he replaced it in his breast-pocket.

“The hardest job I know of,” he muttered, “practising self-denial.” Then aloud, “Well, Bob, do they bite?”

“No: only suck. Lost two more baits; but I shall have a big one

directly."

"Glad of it. How will you cook it – roast or boil?"

"Don't chaff. Mind your own line."

Drew Lennox smiled, glanced down at his line, which the stream had now drawn out tight, and, satisfied that the stone to which it was tied would give him fair warning if he were fortunate enough to get a bite, he stepped back, picked up his rifle, and taking out his handkerchief, began to give it a rub here and a rub there, to add polish to the well-cleaned barrel, trigger-guard, and lock.

He took some time over this, but at last all was to his satisfaction; and laying down the piece on the rock by his side, he once more drew up his line, glancing up-stream, to see that his companion was similarly occupied, both finding the bait gone.

"I say, isn't it aggravating?" said Dickenson. "I know what they are – sort of mullet-like fish with small mouths. Put on a smaller bait."

"All right; good plan," said Lennox.

"Wish to goodness I'd a few well-scoured English worms. I'd soon let the fish know!"

"Ah, I suppose they would be useful," said Lennox, moulding up a piece of paste and trying to make it as hard as he could. "I say, Bob."

"Hullo!"

"I've read that you can dig up great fat worms here in South Africa, eighteen inches long."

"Dig one up, then, and I'll cut it into eighteen inch-long baits."

"I didn't bring a spade with me, old fellow," said Drew, smiling.

"Humph! Why didn't you?"

"Same reason that you didn't bring out some worms in your kit. I say, are you loaded?"

"Of course. You asked me before."

Drew Lennox said no more, but glanced up-stream and down-stream, after starting his bait once again upon its swim. Then, after watching the rings uncoil till the line was tight, he swept the edge of the opposite bank some fifty yards away, carefully searching the clumps of trees and bushes, partly in search of a lurking enemy or spying Kaffir, taught now by experience always to be on the alert, and partly in the faint hope of catching a glimpse of something in the shape of game such as would prove welcome in the famine that he and his comrades were experiencing.

But, as he might have known in connection with game, their coming would have been quite sufficient to scare off the keen eared and eyed wild creatures; and he glanced down at his line again, thinking in a rather hopeless way that he and his friend might just as well have stayed in camp at the laager they had fortified with so much care.

His next act was to open the flap of his belt holster and carefully withdraw the revolver which now rarely left his side. After a short examination of the mechanism, this came in for

a good rub and polish from the handkerchief before it was replaced.

"Nearly had one," cried his companion, after a snatch at the line he held.

"Didn't get a bite, did you?"

"Bite? A regular pull; but I was a bit too late. Why don't you attend to your fishing instead of fiddle-faddling with that revolver? Pull up your line."

Drew Lennox smiled doubtingly as he drew the leather cover of the holster over the stud before stooping to take hold of the line at his feet.

"I believe that was all fancy, Master Bobby," he said. "If there have been any fish here, the crocodiles have cleared them out, or the Boers have netted them. It will be dry biscuit for us again to-night, or – My word!"

"Got one?" cried Dickenson, excited in turn, for his brother officer's manner had suddenly changed from resigned indifference to eager action, as he felt the violent jerk given to his line by something or other that he had hooked.

"Got one? Yes; a monster. Look how he pulls."

"Oh, be careful; be careful old chap!" cried Dickenson wildly, and he left the stone upon which he was standing to hurry to his friend's side. "That's a fifteen or twenty pound fish, and it means dinner for the mess."

"I believe it's a young crocodile," said Lennox. "My word, how it tugs!"

"Play it – play it, man! Don't pull, or you'll drag the hook out of its jaws. Give it line."

"Can't; he has it all out."

"Then you'll have to follow it down-stream."

"What! go into the water? No, thanks."

"What! shrink from wading when you've got on a fish like that at the end of your line? Here, let me come."

"No; I'll play the brute and land him myself. But, I say, it's a fine one of some kind; pulls like an eel. Look how it's wagging its head from side to side."

"Better let me come," said Dickenson, whose face was scarlet from excitement.

"Get out!"

"I'll never forgive you if you lose that fish, Lennox, old man."

"Not going to lose him. Look; he has turned, and is coming up-stream;" for the line, which a few moments before was being violently jerked, suddenly grew slack.

"Gone! gone! gone!" cried Dickenson, with something of a sob in his throat.

"You be quiet!" said Drew. "I thought, it was only a bit of wood a few minutes ago."

"Fish, of course, and the hook's broken away."

"Think so?" was the cool reply, as foot after foot of the line was drawn in. "I was beginning to be of the opinion that he had given it up as a bad job and was swimming right in to surrender."

"No; I told you so. You've dragged the hook right out the fish's

jaws, and – Oh, I'm blessed!"

"With a good opinion of yourself, Bobby," said Drew, laughing; for after softly hauling in about eight or ten yards of the stout water-cord he felt the fish again, when it gave one smart tug at the line and dashed up past the stone, running out all that had been recovered in a very few seconds.

Directly after there was a check and a jerk at the officer's hand, while a cry escaped his lips as he let the line go and stooped to pick up his rifle.

"That's no good," began Dickenson.

"Quick, man! Down with you! – Ah! you've left your rifle. Cover!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Dickenson; and his jaw dropped, and he stood motionless, staring across the river at the sight before him on the other bank.

"Hands up! Surrender! You're surrounded!" shouted a rough voice. "Drop that rifle, or we fire."

Drew Lennox was bent nearly double in the act of raising it as these words were uttered, and he saw before him some twenty or thirty barrels, whose holders had covered him, and apparently only awaited another movement on the young officer's part to shoot him down as they would have done a springbok.

"Oh dear!" groaned Dickenson; "to come to this!" And he was in the act of raising his hands in token of surrender when his comrade's head caught him full in the chest and drove him back among the bushes which grew densely at the mouth of the gully.

Crack! crack! crack! crack! rang out half-a-dozen rifles, and Lennox, who as the consequence of his spring was lying right across his comrade, rolled off him.

"Hurt?" panted the latter in agonised tones.

"No. Now then, crawl after me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Creep up level with your rifle, and cover you while you get it."

"Is it any use, old fellow? There's about fifty of them over yonder."

"I don't care if there are five hundred," growled Lennox through his teeth. "Come along; we must keep it up till help comes from the laager."

"Then you mean to fight?" panted Dickenson as he crawled after his leader; while the Boers from the other side kept up a dropping fire right into and up the gully, evidently under the impression that the two officers were making that their line of retreat instead of creeping under cover of the bushes at the foot of the cliff-like bank, till Drew stopped opposite where the abandoned rifle lay upon the stone Dickenson had left, so far unseen.

Where they stopped the bushes were shorter and thinner, and they had a good view of the enemy, who had taken cover close to the edge of their bank and were keeping up a steady fire, sending their bullets searching the dense growth of the ravine, while about a dozen mounted men now appeared, cantering along

towards where there was a ford about a mile lower down.

"That's to surround us, old man," said Dickenson. "The miserable liars! There isn't a man this side. But oh, my chest! You've knocked in some of my ribs."

"Hang your ribs! We must get that rifle."

"Wait till I get my wind back," panted Dickenson. – "Oh, what a fool I was to lay it down!"

"You were, Bobby; you were," said Drew quietly. "Here, hold mine, and I'll dash out and bring it back."

"No, you don't!" cried the young officer; and as he crouched there on all fours he bounded out like a bear, seized the rifle from where it lay, and rushed back, followed by the shouts and bullets of four or five Boers, who saw him, but not quickly enough to get an effective aim.

"Now call me a fool again," panted Dickenson, shuffling himself behind a stone.

It was Drew Lennox's rifle that spoke, not he, as in reply to the fire they had brought upon them he took careful aim and drew trigger, when one of the Boers sprang up fully into sight, turned half-round, threw up his rifle, and fell back over the edge of the cliff among the bushes similar to those which sheltered the young Englishmen.

"Good shot, lad!"

"Yes. On his own head be it," said Lennox. "A cowardly ambush. Fire as soon as you can steady yourself. Where are you? I can't see you."

"Ahint this stone, laddie," replied Dickenson coolly enough now. "And you?"

"Behind this one here."

"That's right; I was afraid you were only bushed. Ah! my turn," —*crack*! – "now. Bull's-eye, old man."

As the words left his lips Lennox fired again, and another Boer who was badly hidden sprang up and dropped back.

"Two less," said Drew in a husky whisper, while *crack! crack*! went the Boer rifles, and a peculiar shattering echo arose from the far side of the river as the bullets flattened upon the rocks or cut the bushes like knives; while from being few in number they rapidly became more, those of the enemy who had been searching the gully down which the young men had come now concentrating their fire upon the little cluster of rocks and trees behind which they were hidden.

"Don't waste a cartridge, Bob lad," said Lennox, whose voice sounded strange to his companion, "and hold your magazine in case they try a rush."

"Or for those fellows who'll come round by the ford," replied Dickenson.

"Never mind them. The firing will bring our lads out, and they'll tackle those gentlemen."

"All right. – Ah! I've been waiting for you, my friend," whispered Dickenson, and he fired quickly at one of the enemy who was creeping along towards a spot from which he probably thought he would be able to command the spot where the young

Englishmen lay. But he never reached it. He just exposed himself once for a few moments, crawling like a short, thick snake. Then his rifle was jerked upwards to the full extent of the poor wretch's arm and fell back. He made no other movement, but lay quite still, while the rifles around him cracked and the bullets pattered faster and faster about where the two young men were hidden.

"I say, how queer your voice is!" said Dickenson. "Not hurt, are you?"

"No, and yes. This hurts me, Bob lad. I almost wish I wasn't such a good shot."

"I don't," muttered the other. "I want to live." Then aloud, "Don't talk like that, man! It's their lives or ours. Hit every one you can. – Phew! that was near my skull. I say, I don't call this coming fishing."

He turned towards his comrade with a comical look of dismay upon his countenance after a very narrow escape from death, a bullet having passed through his cap, when *whizz! whizz! whirr*! half-a-dozen more bullets passed dangerously near.

"Mind, for goodness' sake!" shouted Lennox, in a voice full of the agony he felt. "Don't you see that you are exposing yourself?"

"What am I to do?" cried the young officer angrily. "If I lean an inch that way they fire at me, and if I turn this way it's the same."

"Creep closer to the stone."

"Then I can't take aim."

"Then don't try. We've got to shelter till their firing brings

help."

"Oh, it's all very fine to talk, Drew, old chap, but I'm not going to lie here like a target for them to practise at without giving the beggars tit for tat. – Go it, you ugly Dutch ruffians! There, how do you like that?"

He fired as he spoke, after taking careful aim at another, who, from a post of vantage, kept on sending his bullets dangerously near.

"Did you hit?" asked Lennox.

"I think so," was the reply. "He has backed away."

"We must keep on firing at them," said Lennox; "but keep your shots for those who are highest up there among the trees."

He set the example as he spoke, firing, after taking a long and careful aim, at a big-bearded fellow who had crawled some distance to his right so as to try and take the pair in the flank. The Boer had reached his fresh position by making a rush, and his first shot struck the stones close to Drew's face, sending one up to inflict a stinging blow on the cheek, while in the ricochet it went whizzing by Dickenson's shoulder, making him start and utter an angry ejaculation, for he had again exposed himself.

"Wish I could break myself off bad habits," he muttered, as a little shower of bullets came whizzing about them, but too late to harm.

There was a certain amount of annoyance in his tones, for he noted that, while he had started up a little, his companion, in spite of the stinging blow he had received on the cheek, lay

perfectly motionless upon his chest, waiting his time, finger on trigger, and ready to give it a gentle pressure when he had ceased to aim at one particular spot where he had seen the Boer's head for a moment.

He did not have long to wait; for the moment the Boer had fired he slightly raised his head to try and mark the effect of his shot.

That was sufficient. Lennox squeezed rather than pulled the trigger, and as the smoke rose the bush which had sheltered the Boer moved violently for a few moments, and all was still there; while the young officer quickly reloaded and waited to see if another man took his enemy's place.

Chapter Two.
What they caught

"Serve him right!" Dickenson growled more than spoke. "There's another chap creeping away yonder so as to enfilade us from the left."

"Well, you know what to do," said Lennox grimly.

Dickenson uttered a grunt, and, paying no further heed to the bullets that kept on spattering about the rocks, every now and then striking up a shower of loose stones, waited, patiently watching a spot that he had marked down a couple of hundred yards away up the river to his left. For he had seen one of the most pertinacious of their aggressors draw back, apparently without reason.

"He couldn't have known that I meant to pick him out for my next shot," the young officer said to himself, "and he couldn't have been hurt, so he's up to the same sort of game as that fellow old Lennox brought down."

He turned his head sharply, not on account of a bullet coming too close, but to learn the effect of another shot from his companion.

"Hit or miss?" he said gruffly.

"Hit," was the laconic reply.

Dickenson had only glanced round, and then fixed his eyes

once more upon the little clump of bushes he had before noted.

"That's the place he'll show at for certain," he muttered, and getting the sight of his rifle well upon one particular spot where a big grey stone reared itself up level with the tops of the bushes, he waited for quite five minutes, which were well dotted with leaden points.

"Ha! I was right," said Dickenson to himself, for all at once he caught a glimpse of the barrel of a rifle reared up and then lowered down over the top of the stone in his direction.

The distance was great, and the rifle-barrel looked no larger than a metal ramrod, but the clearness of the South African air showed it plainly enough; and hugging himself closer together, the young officer laid his cheek close to the stock of his piece, closed his left eye, and glanced along the barrel, waiting for the opportunity he felt sure must come.

The excitement of the moment made his heart beat fast, and his eyes glittered as he gazed; but there was nothing to see now save a beautiful green clump of thorn bush, with the great grey granite block in its midst.

"I make it two hundred and fifty yards good," he said to himself, and he raised the sight of his rifle. "I ought to be able to hit a steady mark at that distance when cool, and I feel as cool now as a cucumber. They're grand shots these chaps, and if he can make out my face he'll bring me down as sure as a gun; and if he does there's new mourning to be got at home, and a lot of crying, and the old lady and the girls breaking their hearts about

stupid old me, so I must have first shot if I can get it. Very stupid of them at home. They don't know what a fool every one thinks me out here. Nice, though, all the same, and I like 'em – well, love 'em, say – love 'em all too well to let them go breaking their hearts about me; so here goes, Mr Boer. But he doesn't go. He must be waiting up there, because I saw his gun. What a while he is! Or is it I'm impatient and think the time long? Couldn't have been mistaken. I'd speak to old Lennox, but if I do it's a chance if the enemy don't show and get first shot."

Dickenson seemed to cease thinking for a few moments, and lay listening to the rattle of the Boers' guns across the river and the spattering echo-like sounds of the bullets striking around. Then he began to think again, with his eyes fixed upon the top of the grey stone in the distance, and noting now that a clearly-cut shadow from a long strand was cast right across the top of the stone.

"That's just in front of where his face ought to be when he takes aim," thought the young officer. – "Aim at me, to put them at home in mourning and make them go to church the next Sunday and hear our old vicar say a kind word for our gallant young friend who died out in the Transvaal. But he sha'n't if I can help it. Nasty, sneaking, cowardly beggar! I never did him any harm, and I don't want to do him any harm; but as he means to shoot me dead, why, common-sense seems to say, 'Have first shot at him, Bobby, old chap, if you can, for you're only twenty, and as the days of man are seventy years all told, he's going to

do you out of fifty, which would be a dead robbery, of course; and in this case a dead robbery means murder into the bargain.'"

Bob Dickenson's musings stopped short for a few moments while he looked in vain for some sign of his enemy. Then he went on again in a desultory way, paying no heed to the bullets flying over and around him, and for the time being forgetting all about his comrade, who kept on firing whenever he had an opportunity.

"What a pity it seems!" he mused. "Birds flitting about, bees and butterflies sipping the honey out of the flowers, which are very beautiful; so is this gully, with the sparkling water and ferns and things all a-growing and a-blowing, as they say. Why, I should like nothing better than loafing round here enjoying myself by looking about and doing no harm to anything. I wouldn't even catch the fish if I wasn't so hungry; and yet, here I am with a magazine-rifle trying to shoot a Boer dead.

"Humph! yes," he continued after a short pause; "but only so that he sha'n't shoot me dead. This is being a soldier, this is. Why was I such a fool as to be one? The uniform and the band and the idea of being brave and all that sort of thing, I suppose. Rather different out here. No band; no uniform but this dirt-coloured khaki; no bed to sleep on; no cover but the tent; roasting by day, freezing by night: hardly a chance to wash one's self, and nothing to eat; and no one to look at you but the Boers, and when they come to see what the soldiers of the Queen are like they send word they are there with bullets, bless 'em! Well, I suppose it's all right. We must have soldiers, and I wanted to be one, and now

I am one there does seem to be something more than the show in doing one's duty bravely, as they call it.

"Well," he muttered at last, "this is getting monotonous, and I'm growing tired of it. If they do shoot us both, they'll have had to pay for it. Why, they must have used a couple of hundred cartridges. Not very good work for such crack shots as they are said to be. If they spend a hundred cartridges to shoot one buck, it would come cheaper to buy their meat.

"All fancy," he muttered directly after; "that fellow couldn't have been going where I thought, and yet it seemed so likely. There's the clump of trees, and the very stone a fellow would make for to rest his rifle on when he took aim from his snug hiding-place. But there's no one there. The sun shines right upon it, so that I could see in a moment if a Boer was there. His face would be just beyond that shadow cast so clearly by what must be a dead bough. Yes, all a fancy of mine."

"Bob!" cried Lennox.

"Hullo!"

"I shall want some of your cartridges if help doesn't come soon."

Bob Dickenson made no further reply, but lay gazing with one eye along the barrel of his rifle; for as his comrade spoke it suddenly occurred to him that the top of the grey block of granite looked a little different, but in what way he could not have explained. He noted, too, that there was a tiny flash of light such as might have been thrown off a bright crystal of feldspar,

and without pause now he held his rifle more firmly, laid the sight upon the flashing light, and the next moment he would have pulled the trigger. But ere he could tighten his finger upon the little curved piece of steel within the guard of his piece, there was a flash, a puff of smoke, and a sensation as if a wasp had whizzed by his ear. He did not move, only waited while one might have counted ten, and then tightened his grasp.

"Bah!" he ejaculated as the little puff of smoke rose slowly, "how this rifle kicks! Humph!" as the smoke cleared rapidly as soon as it rose enough for the wind to catch it, "I was right after all."

"Hit?" asked Lennox.

"Yes; and just in time, for we should have been in an awkward place directly."

"Yes; and I'm afraid we shall be all the same," said Lennox. "Try if you can do any good at a couple of fellows across yonder. I can't touch them from where I lie, and if I move I shall shoot no more."

Dickenson turned from where he was gazing hard at the top of the granite block, the appearance of which was now completely changed; for the Boer who, in accordance with what the young officer had anticipated, had sent so dangerous a bullet whizzing by his ear, had suddenly sprung up, fallen forward, and now lay there with outstretched hands still clutching his rifle, which rested upon the ground in front.

"Mind me firing over you?" said the young officer.

"No; but give me a hint first."

"All right. I shall have to – Stop a moment," he growled softly as a puff of smoke spurted up and another bullet came dangerously near. "That's the worst fellow, isn't he?"

"One's as bad as the other. Lie close."

"Can't lie any closer, old man. Skin seems to be growing to the rock as it is."

Crack!

There was another shot, the puff of smoke rising from close alongside the former one which Dickenson had seen.

"I say," he cried, "which of us are they firing at?"

"Both, I expect," said Lennox. "They're sheltered by the same rock; one fires from one side, the other from the second. I can't touch them. Try at once."

"Don't you hurry me, or I shall muff it, old man," said Dickenson coolly. "I want a better chance. There's nothing but a bit of wideawake to fire at now. – Ha! Lie still. He's reaching out to fire at me, I think."

Dickenson's rifle spurted, and their enemy's was like an echo; but the muzzle of the Boer's piece was suddenly jerked upward, and the bullet had an opportunity of proving how far a Mauser rifle would carry with a high trajectory.

"Thanks, old fellow," said Lennox. "That has halved the risk. Perhaps the other fellow will think it too dangerous to stay."

"Doesn't seem like it," said Dickenson, drawing in his breath sharply and clapping his left hand to his ear.

"Don't say you're hit, Bob!" cried Lennox in an agonised tone.

"All right; I won't if you don't want me to."

"But are you?"

"I suppose so. There's a bit taken out of my left ear, and I can feel something trickling down inside my collar."

"Oh Bob, old fellow!" cried Lennox.

"Lie still, man! What are you going to do?"

"Bind up the place."

"You won't if you stir."

There was pretty good proof of this, for another shot whizzed between them. But he who sent it had been too venturesome in taking aim to revenge his comrade's fall, and the result of Dickenson's return shot was fatal, for he too sprang up into a kneeling posture, and they saw him for a few moments trying to rise to his feet, but only to fall over to the left, right in view of the two officers.

Drew uttered a sigh of relief.

"If we are to escape," he said, "we must stop any one from getting into that position again."

"Look sharp, then," said Dickenson, whose keen eyes detected a movement on the other side of the river. "There's a chap creeping among the bushes on all fours."

"I see him," cried Drew; and as he followed the enemy's movements and took aim, Dickenson, who was in the better position for commanding them, followed his example.

"Missed!" cried Drew angrily as he fired and the Boer raised

a hand and waved it derisively.

"Hit!" exclaimed Dickenson the next instant. For he too had fired, and with better aim, the Boer drawing himself together, springing up, and turning to run, but only to stagger the next minute and fall heavily among the bushes, which hid him from sight.

"Now for the next," continued Dickenson, coolly reloading. "Look out; I'm going to watch the other end."

He turned sharply as a fresh shower of bullets came scattering around them, and looked keenly at the granite rock and its burden, half-expecting to see a fresh occupant taking aim. But apparently no one seemed disposed to expose himself anew to the rifles of such deadly shots, and the terrible peril to which the two fishermen had been exposed ceased for the time being, though the pair waited in momentary expectation of its recurrence.

But the enemy did not slacken their efforts to finish their task by easier means, and the firing from the front went on more briskly than ever, the young officers contenting themselves with holding theirs and displaying no excitement now, their shelter, so long as they lay close, being sufficient, the worst befalling them now being a sharp rap from a scrap of stone struck from the rocks, or the fall of a half-flattened bullet.

"That's right; don't fire until we are in an emergency," said Drew at the end of a few minutes.

"In a what?" cried Dickenson.

"In regular peril."

"Why, what do you call this?" cried Dickenson, with a laugh. "I made my will half-an-hour ago – in fancy, of course."

"Well, it is a hot corner," said Drew, joining in his companion's grim mirth; "but we haven't got to the worst of it yet."

"What!" yelled Dickenson. "Oh Drew, old man, you are about the coolest fish in the regiment. It can't be worse than it has been."

"Can't it? Wait a few minutes, and the party who made for the ford will be at us."

"But they can't get their horses down the way we came."

"No; but they can leave them with a fourth of their fellows to hold while they get somewhere within shot, and then we're done. What do you say to tying a handkerchief to a rifle-barrel and holding it up? We've held out well."

"Nothing! What do you say?"

"Same as you do; but I thought I'd give you the option if you did not feel as obstinate as I do."

"Obstinate? I don't call it obstinate to hold out now. I've seen too many of our poor lads carried to the rear. Here," continued the speaker, after feeling, "I haven't used half my cartridges yet. Ask me again when they're all gone, and then I'll tell you the idea I've got."

"What is it? Tell me now."

"Very well. We'll fire the last cartridge at the cowardly brutes

– fifty at least to two – and then give them a surprise."

"What! walk out and hold up your hands?"

"No; that would be a surprise, of course; but I've got a better."

"Let's have it."

"Walk in."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, crawl, then, into the river. Get quietly in from behind some of the overhanging bushes, and float down with the stream."

"Wouldn't do, Bobby; they wouldn't trust us. They'd see us floating."

"They'd think we were dead."

"Not they. The Boers are too slim, as they call it, and would pump a few bullets into us. Besides, I have no fancy for being dragged down by a crocodile or grabbed by a hippo."

"Think there are any crocs?"

"Plenty in some of the rivers."

"But the hippos, wouldn't touch us, would they?"

"Very likely. They don't hesitate about seizing a canoe and crunching it in two. No, your plan won't do, lad. I'd rather die ashore here."

"Dry?" said Dickenson quietly. "Well, I dare say it would be nicer. But there, we're not quite cornered yet."

Crack went a bullet overhead, and a report came from a fresh direction almost simultaneously.

"Wrong!" said Drew coolly. "We are cornered now. That's the

first shot from the men who have crossed to our side."

"All right; I'm ready for them. Let's finish our cartridges."

"We will, Bob," said Drew quite calmly, in spite of their extremity.

"What do you want?" said Dickenson. "You haven't used all your cartridges?"

"No; only about half."

"Then why did you hold out your hand?"

"Shake! In case," said Drew laconically.

"Sha'n't! I'm not going to look upon the business as having come to that pitch yet. Look out; we ought to see some of them soon."

For shots were beginning to come about them to supplement those sent from across the river, but so ill directed that it was evident that their fresh assailants were guessing at their position below the perpendicular cliff-like bank.

"This won't hurt us," said Dickenson coolly.

"No; but some of them will be having their heads over the edge up there directly."

"They can't while their friends are firing from the other side as they are. But when they do look down it will be rather awkward for the first two."

"Here, quick, look out, Bob!" cried Lennox, for the firing from the farther bank suddenly ceased, and the rustling and cracking of twigs somewhere overhead told that the fresh danger was very near.

Dickenson's reply to his companion's order was to place himself quickly with his back to the rocks that had sheltered him, sitting with his rifle pointing upward.

Drew took the same position, and none too soon; for, following closely upon the rustling sound, the makers of which were still invisible, a couple of shots were fired down at them, the bullets striking the stones just over their heads.

No reply was made, for the enemy were quite hidden, and with beating hearts the two young Englishmen waited in horrible suspense for their chance – one which never came; for directly after quite a volley was fired, apparently from some distance back from the edge, and, to Drew's horror, a big burly Boer seemed to leap down from the top of the cliff to seize them for prisoners.

That was his first surmise. The next moment he knew the truth, for with a heavy thud the man struck the stones, falling sidewise, and then turned over upon his face, to lie with his limbs quivering slightly for a few moments before he lay perfectly still.

"Hurrah!" shouted Dickenson, springing to his feet.

"Down! down!" roared Drew, snatching at his brother officer's arm.

But the need for caution was at an end, for volley after volley came rolling down into the river-bed, and proof of help being at hand was given by the rapid firing of the Boers on the other side of the river, a duel on a large scale being kept up for some ten minutes before the firing on the far side ceased.

"Whopped!" shouted Dickenson excitedly. "Look! look!" he cried, pointing down the river and across at an open spot where some dozens of the enemy were streaming away, galloping as hard as their little Bechuana ponies could go, but not escaping scatheless, four saddles being emptied by the fire from the cliff above the watchers' heads.

"I wonder whether the other men who crossed have escaped," said Drew thoughtfully, as he took his whistle from his cross-belt and held it ready to blow.

"Take it for granted they have, my son," said Dickenson. "They really are clever at that sort of thing. I say, I'm glad I didn't go through that performance."

"What performance?" said Drew wonderingly.

"Hand-shaking in that sentimental way."

"It wouldn't have done you any harm."

"Perhaps not; but, I say, don't stand fiddling about with that whistle. Blow, man, blow, and let the lads know where we are. I don't want to be shot now by our own men: too degrading, that."

Drew placed the whistle to his lips, and the shrill, penetrating, chirruping call rang out, while Dickenson stood looking upward towards the top of the bank.

> Then Robin he put him his horn to his mouth
> And a blast he did loudly blow,
> While quick at the call his merry men all
> Came tripping along in a row!

He half-hummed, half-sang the old lines in a pleasant baritone voice, and then listened.

"Don't see many *merry men* tripping – poor, hungry beggars! Blow again, Drew, old man. Why don't they stop firing?"

Drew blew again, and, to the intense satisfaction of both, the whistle was answered from among the trees above.

"Ahoy there! Where are you?"

"Here! here!" shouted the young officers together.

"Cease firing!" came now in a familiar voice, and the shots died out.

"It's Roby," said Drew eagerly.

"Never liked him so well before," said Dickenson, laughing. "Ahoy! We're coming up."

"Oh, there you are!" came from above, and a good, manly, sun-tanned face was thrust over the edge of the cliff. "All right?"

"Yes! Yes!" was the reply.

"That's better than I expected, lads," cried the officer. "Does one good. I thought we were avenging your death. Well," – the speaker's face expanded into a broad grin – "it's getting on towards dinner-time. What have you caught?"

"Tartars!" growled Drew shortly.

"Yes," said Dickenson; "a regular mess."

Chapter Three.
On the Qui Vive

"So it seems," said the officer above. "But hullo, you! You're wounded."

"Pooh! stuff!" said Dickenson shortly; "bit picked out of my ear."

"But," – began the head of the rescue party.

"Let it be," said Dickenson snappishly as he pressed his hand to the injured place. "If I don't howl about it, I'm sure you needn't."

"Very well, old fellow, I will not. Ugh! what's that down there – that fellow dead?"

The officer leaned out as far as he could so as to get a good look at the motionless figure at the foot of the cliff.

Drew glanced at the figure too, and nodded his head.

"Who shot him – you or Dickenson?"

"Neither of us," said Drew gravely. "It was the work of one of your fellows; he fell from up there. But what about the party who crossed by the ford?"

"Oh, we've accounted for them. Cut them off from the ford and surrounded them. Fifteen, and bagged the lot, horses and all."

"You were a precious long time coming, though, Roby,"

grumbled Dickenson. “We seem to have been firing here all day.”

“That’s gratitude!” said the officer. “We came as quickly as we could. Nice job, too, to advance on a gang well under cover and double covered by the strong body across the river. There must have been sixty or seventy of them; but,” added the captain meaningly, “sixty or seventy have not gone back. How many do you think are down? We’ve accounted for a dozen, I should say, *hors de combat*.”

“I don’t know,” said Drew shortly, “and don’t want to.”

“What do you say, Dickenson?” asked the captain.

“The same as Lennox here.”

“Come, come, speak out and don’t be so thin-skinned. We’ve got to report to Lindley.”

“Six haven’t moved since,” said Dickenson, looking uneasy now that the excitement of the fight was at an end; “and I should say twice as many more wounded.”

“Serve ’em right. Their own fault,” said the captain.

It was decided to be too risky a proceeding to cross the river, for the Boers were certain to be only a short distance away, sheltered in some advantageous position, waiting to try and retrieve their dead and wounded; so a small party was posted by the ford to guard against any crossing of the river, and then the prisoners were marched off towards the village a couple of miles distant, where the detachment of infantry and mounted men had been holding the Boers across the river in check for some weeks past.

A few shots followed them from a distance at first; but the enemy had received quite as much punishment as they desired upon that occasion, and soon ceased the aggressive, being eager for a truce to communicate with the little rear-guard posted in the scrub by the river so as to recover their wounded and dead.

On the way back to the village the two young officer's had to relate in full their experience, which was given in a plain, unvarnished way; and then as a sharp descent was reached, and the rescued officers caught sight of the well-guarded prisoners marching on foot, their Bechuana ponies having been appropriated by their captors, Dickenson began to grow sarcastic.

"Glad you've made such a nice lot of prisoners, Roby," he said.

"Thanks," said the officer addressed, smiling contentedly. "Not so bad – eh? The colonel will be delighted. Nice useful lot of ponies – eh?"

"Ye-es. The old man must be delighted. We're all about starving, and you're taking him about a score more mouths to feed."

"Eh?" cried the captain, aghast. "Why, of course; I never thought of that."

"Dickenson did," said Lennox, laughing. "A thing like this touches him to the heart – I mean lower down."

"You hold your tongue, my fine fellow," growled Dickenson. "You're as bad as I am. I don't like the fighting, but I'm ready to do my share if you'll only feed me well. I feel as if I'd been losing flesh for weeks."

"And done you good," said Lennox seriously. "You were much too fat."

"Look here, Drew," growled the young man addressed; "do you want to quarrel?"

"Certainly not," was the reply. "I've had quite enough for one day."

Further conversation was prevented by their approach to the village, which was built at the foot of a precipitous kopje, the spot having been chosen originally for its fertility consequent upon the fact that a copious spring of fresh water rose high up among the rocks to form the little stream and gully at whose mouth the young officers had met with their fishing experience.

This village, known as Groenfontein, had been held now for nearly two months by the little force, the idea being that it was to be occupied for a day at the most, and vacated after the Boers had been driven off. But though this had been done at once, the enemy had, as Drew Lennox said, a disgracefully unmilitary way of coming back after they had been thoroughly beaten. They had come back here after the driving; others had come to help them from east, west, north, and south, and as soon as they were strengthened they had set to work to drive the British force away or capture it *en bloc*; but that was quite another thing.

For, as Dickenson said, the colonel's instructions were to drive and not be driven. So the Boers were driven as often as there was a chance; and then, as they kept on returning, the force had to stay, and did so, getting plenty of opportunities for making fresh

drives, till the colonel felt that it was all labour in vain and waste of time.

Under these circumstances he sent messengers explaining the position and asking for instructions. But his despatches did not seem to have been delivered, for no orders came to him, and their bearers did not return. Consequently, like a sturdy British officer, he fell back upon his first command to hold the Boers in check at Groenfontein, soon finding that they held him in check as well, for even had he felt disposed to retire, it would have been impossible except at the cost of losing half his men; so he held on and waited for the relief which he felt would sooner or later come.

But it did not come sooner, and he relied on the later, making the best of things. Colonel Lindley's way of making the best of things was to return a contemptuous reply to the demands made from time to time for his surrender.

The first time this demand was made was when the enemy had him in front and rear. The envoys who came informed him that his position was perfectly hopeless, for he could not cross the river in face of the strong body the Boers had lining the banks; and that they had him in front, and if his people did not give up their arms they would be shot down to a man.

The colonel's answer to this was, "Very well, gentlemen; shoot away."

His officers were present, and Drew Lennox and Bob Dickenson exchanged glances at the word "gentlemen," for the

embassy looked like anything but that; and they departed in an insolent, braggart way, and very soon after began to shoot, using up a great many cartridges, but doing very little harm. Then, growing weary, they gave up, and the colonel set one part of his men to work with the spade till dark, making rifle-pit and trench; while as soon as it was dark he despatched fully half of his force to occupy the precipitous mound at the back of the village, making a natural stronghold which he intended to connect with the camp by means of stone walls the next day, having a shrewd notion that if he did not the Boers would, for the mound commanded the place, and would soon make it untenable.

Captain Roby's company and another were sent to this duty, and the men were carefully posted – Lennox and Dickenson on the highest part, which was naturally the most windy and cold. Their orders, which they conveyed to the men, were to keep the strictest lookout, though the enemy had retired far enough away; for the Boers had at that early period of the war already acquired the credit of being slim and clever at ambush and night attack.

But the night was well advanced, and the two friends, after visiting post after post, were sitting huddled up in their greatcoats, longing for hot coffee or cigarettes, and feeling obliged to rub their sleepy and tired eyes from time to time, weary as they were with straining to see danger creeping up over the black, dark veldt, but straining in vain.

"B-r-r-r! What humbug it is to call this Africa!" growled Dickenson.

"What do you mean?" replied Lennox.

"Mean? Why, it's so cold. Where's your blazing heat and your sand? One might be at the North Pole. Ow! don't do that."

He started violently, for Lennox had suddenly stolen out a hand and pinched his arm sharply.

"Quiet! Listen!"

Dickenson drew his breath hard and strained his ears instead of his eyes.

"Well? Can't hear anything."

"Hist! Listen again."

There was a pause.

"Hear anything?"

"Yes; but I don't know what it is," said Dickenson, laying a hand behind one ear and leaning forward with his head on one side.

"What does it sound like?"

"Something like a heavy wagon coming along a road with its wheels muffled."

"Heavy wagon drawn by oxen?"

"Yes," replied Dickenson.

"Mightn't it be a big gun?"

"It might," said Dickenson dubiously; "but what, could a big gun be doing out there on the open veldt?"

"Lying still in its carriage, and letting itself be drawn to the place where it was to be mounted."

"Yes, of course it might be; but it couldn't."

"Why not? Bob, old fellow," whispered Lennox in an excited whisper, "I believe the Boers are stealing a march upon us."

"Well, they won't, because we're on the watch. But out with it: what is it you think?"

"They don't know that we are occupying the kopje to-night."

"No; we came after it was dark."

"Exactly. Well, they're bringing up a big gun to mount up here and give us a surprise in the morning."

"Phe-ew!" whistled Dickenson. "Oh, surely not!"

"I feel sure that they are."

"Well, let's send word on to the old man. Send one of the sergeants."

"And by the time he got there with his news, and reinforcements could be sent, the enemy would have the gun here."

"Let's tell Roby, then."

"Yes; come on."

In another minute they had told their officer their suspicions, and he hummed and ha'd a little after listening.

"It hardly seems likely," he said, "and I don't want to raise a false alarm. Besides, the outposts have given no notice; and hark! I can hear nothing."

"Now?"

They listened in the darkness, and it was as their captain suggested: all perfectly still.

"There," he said. "It would be horrible to rouse up the colonel

on account of a cock-and-bull story."

"But it would be worse for him to be warned too late. There it is again; hark!" whispered Lennox, stretching out a hand in the direction farthest from the village.

"Can't hear anything," said the captain.

"I can," growled Dickenson softly.

"Yes, so can I now. It's a wagon whose drivers have missed their way, I should say. But we'll see."

"Or feel," grunted the captain. "It's as black as ink. – Here, Lennox, take a sergeant's guard and go forward softly to see if you can make anything out. I don't know, though; it may be as you say, and if it is – "

"We ought to bring in that gun," whispered Lennox.

"Yes, at all hazards. I don't know, though. There, take five-and-twenty of the lads, and act as seems best. If you can do it easily, force the drivers to come on, but don't run risks. If the Boers are in strength fall back at once. You understand?"

"Quite," said Lennox softly.

"Let me go with him, Roby?"

"No; I can't spare you."

"Yes, do; I can help him."

"He can do what there is to do himself, and would rather be alone, for it is only a reconnaissance."

"I should like him with me," said Lennox quietly, and he felt his arm nipped.

"Very well; but don't waste time. I can hear it quite plainly

now. Mind, fall back at once if they are in force. I'll be well on the alert to cover you and your party."

The requisite number of men were soon under the young officer's orders, and they followed him softly down the rock-encumbered slope of the natural fortress – no easy task in the darkness; but the men were getting used to the gloom, and it was not long before the party was challenged by an outpost and received the word. They passed on, getting well round to the farther side of the kopje before they were challenged again.

"Glad you've come, sir," said the sentry; "I was just going to fire."

"Why?" asked Lennox softly.

"I can hear something coming out yonder in the darkness. You listen, sir. It's like a heavy wagon."

The man spoke in a whisper; then for some moments all was perfectly still.

"Can't hear it now, sir," whispered the sentry; "but I felt sure I heard something."

"Wait again," said Lennox softly; and there was a good five minutes' interval of waiting, but not a sound could be heard.

"Let's go forward, Bob," whispered Lennox; and after telling the sentry to be well upon the alert, he led his men slowly and cautiously straight away out into the black darkness of the veldt, but without hearing another sound till they were, as far as could be judged, a good two hundred yards from the last outpost, when the men were halted and stood in the black darkness listening

once more, before swinging: round to the right and getting back by a curve to somewhere near the starting-place.

The next moment the young men joined hands and stood listening to an unmistakable sound away to their right and nearer to the kopje. The sound was distant enough to be very soft, but there it was, plainly enough – the calm, quiet crunching up of the food a span of oxen had eaten, indicative of the fact that they had been pulled up by their drivers and were utilising their waiting time by chewing the cud.

"Forward!" whispered Lennox, and his men crept after him without a sound, every one full of excitement, for the general idea was that they were about to surprise some convoy wagon that had gone astray.

A minute later the munching of the oxen sounded quite loudly, and the little party was brought to a halt by a deep, gruff voice saying in Boer Dutch:

"What a while you've been! How much higher can we get?"

"Fix bayonets!" cried Lennox sharply, and a yell of dismay arose, followed by a dozen random shots, as the metallic clinking of the keen, dagger-like weapons was heard against the muzzles of the men's rifles.

The shots fired seemed to cut the black darkness, and the exploded powder spread its dank, heavy fumes in the direction of the men's faces, but as far as Lennox could make out in the excitement of leading his party on in a charge, no one was hurt; and the next minute his little line was brought up short, several of

the men littering angry ejaculations, and as many more bursting into a roar of laughter.

Chapter Four.
Ways and Means

"Here, what in the name of wonder!" cried Dickenson angrily. "Yah! Keep those horns quiet, you beast."

"What is it?" cried Lennox excitedly.

"Roast-beef, sir – leastwise to-morrow, sir," cried one of the men. "We've bay'neted a team of oxen."

"Speak the truth, lad," cried another from Lennox's left. "We've been giving point in a gun-carriage."

"Silence in the ranks!" cried Lennox sternly as he felt about in the darkness, joined now by his comrade, and found that their charge had been checked by a big gun, its limber, and the span – six or eight and twenty oxen – several of the poor beasts having received thrusts from the men's bayonets.

It was a strange breastwork to act as a protection, but from behind its shelter a couple of volleys were sent in the direction of the flashes of light which indicated the whereabouts of the enemy, and this made them continue their flight, the surprise having been too great for their nerves; while the right interpretation was placed upon the adventure at once – to wit, that in ignorance of the fact that Colonel Lindley had done in the darkness exactly what might have been expected, and occupied the kopje, the Boers had brought up a heavy gun with

the intention of mounting it before morning, and had failed.

"What's to be the next?" said Dickenson.

"Next?" cried Lennox. "You must cover us with three parts of the men while with the rest I try to get the gun right up to the kopje."

It was no easy task, for the driver and foreloper of the team had fled with the artillerymen and the rest of the Boers, while the pricked oxen were disposed to be unmanageable. But British soldiers are accustomed to struggle with difficulties of all kinds in war, and by the time the Boers had recovered somewhat from their surprise, and, urged by their leaders, were advancing again to try and recover the lost piece, the team of oxen were once more working together, and the ponderous gun was being slowly dragged onward towards the rocky eminence.

It was terribly hard work in the darkness; for the way, after about a hundred yards or so over level veldt, began to ascend, and blocks of granite seemed to be constantly rising from the ground to impede the progress of the oxen.

In spite of all, though, the gun and its limber were dragged on and on, while in the distance a line of tiny jets of fire kept on spurting out, showing that the enemy had recovered from the panic and were coming on, firing as they came, the bullets whizzing over the heads of our men, but doing no harm.

"Steady! steady! and as quietly as you can," said Lennox in warning tones, as he kept on directing and encouraging his men. "They are firing by guesswork. – Ah! that won't do any good,"

he muttered, for just as he was speaking Dickenson and his men, who had spread out widely, began to reply; "it will only show our weakness."

He looked forward again in the direction the oxen were being driven; but the kopje was invisible, and now he altered his opinion about the firing of Dickenson's detachment, for he felt that it would let the captain know what was going on, and bring up support.

He was quite right, for in a very little time Captain Roby had felt his way to them, learnt the cause of the firing, and carefully covered the retreat till the intricacies of the rocky ascent put a stop to further progress in the gloom, and a halt was called till morning.

The rest of the night passed in the midst of a terrible suspense, for though the Boer firing gradually died out, as if the leaders had at last awakened to the fact of its being a mere waste of ammunition, the British detachment, scattered here and there about the captured gun, lay in momentary expectation of the enemy creeping up and then making a rush.

"But they will not," said Lennox quietly. "They'll wait till morning, and creep up from stone to stone and bush to bush, trying to pick us off."

"You need not be so cock-sure about it," growled Dickenson. "They are in force, and must have known from our fire how few we were. A rush would do it."

"Yes; but they will not rush," replied Lennox. "They

understand too well the meaning of the word *bayonet*. Cock-sure or no, they'll make no dash; but as soon as it begins to be light we shall have a hailstorm."

"Nonsense!" said Dickenson tetchily; "there's no sign of rain."

"I did not say rain," replied Lennox, "but hail – leaden hail from every bit of cover round."

"Oh, I see," said Dickenson. "Well, two sides can play at that game; and I fancy we have most cover here."

Lennox was quite right; for as soon as the first pale grey of a lovely dawn began to make objects stand up in an indistinct way upon the level veldt around the kopje, the sharp cracks of rifle after rifle began at every object that displayed movement upon the eminence, and the pattering of bullets among the rocks often preceded the reports of the Boer rifles.

But by this time Captain Roby had communicated with the colonel in the village, and had taken his steps, sending his men well out in the enemy's direction to take advantage of every scrap of cover to reply wherever it was necessary, which they did, their efforts, as the time went on, to some extent keeping the Boer fire down.

The colonel grasped the position at once and sent assistance, with the result that, in spite of terrible difficulties, by help of horse and mule to supplement the pulling powers of the ox-team, the big gun, limber, and an ammunition-wagon, which daylight showed lying deserted a quarter of a mile away among some bushes into which it had been dragged in the dark, were hauled

to the flat top of the kopje, where they were surrounded with a rough but strong breastwork of the abundant stones, and by the men's breakfast-time a shell was sent well into the midst of a clump of bush which the Boers had made the centre of their advance.

A better shot could not have been made, for as soon as the shell had burst, the defenders of the kopje had the satisfaction of seeing that the greater part of the Boers' ponies had been gathered into shelter there, and a perfect stampede had begun, hundreds of horses, mounted and empty of saddle, streaming away in every direction except that in which the kopje lay.

There was no need for a second shell, for the sputtering rifle-fire ceased as if by magic, the Boers retiring, leaving the colonel's force at liberty to go on at leisure strengthening the emplacement of the enemy's heavy Creusot gun, and forming a magazine for the abundant supply of ammunition, also captured for its use.

The rest of the day was occupied, by as many of the men as could be spared, building up sangars (loose stone walls for breastworks) and contriving rifle-pits and cover to such an extent that already it would have taken a strong and determined force to make any impression; while, when the officers met at the mess that night and the matter was under discussion, the colonel smiled.

"Yes," he said, "pretty well for one day's work; but by the end of a week we shall have a little Gibraltar that will take all the men the Boers have in the field to capture – a regular stronghold,

ready like a castle keep if we have to leave the village."

"And may that never be, colonel," said Captain Roby.

"Hear, hear!" cried every one present.

"So I say," said the colonel; "but we may at any time be ordered to occupy some other position. By the way, though, I should not dislike to send the Boer leader a letter of thanks for sending us that gun and a supply of oxen. How many must be killed?"

"Killed?" cried Captain Roby.

"Yes; several were bayoneted in that charge."

"Three only," replied the captain, "and they don't look much the worse for it. Their flesh seems to close up again like india-rubber. The vet says they will all heal up."

"Good," said the colonel. "Take it all together, I shall have a pleasant despatch to send to the general. The capture of the big gun; not a man killed, and only three wounded. How are they getting on, doctor?"

"Capitally. Nothing serious. But, by the way – " The doctor stopped and began to clean out his pipe.

"Yes, by the way?" said the colonel. "Nothing unpleasant to report, I hope?"

"Um – no," drawled the doctor. "A fresh patient with a touch of fever; but it wasn't that. I meant – that is, I wondered how you meant to send the despatch?"

"Ha! Yes," said the colonel thoughtfully; "how? I don't feel disposed to risk any more men, and I hear that the Kaffirs do

not seem to be tempted by the pay offered them, although I have offered double what I gave before."

"That's bad," said the doctor. "Well, I suppose you can hold this place?"

"Tight!" said the colonel laconically.

"So long as provisions and ammunition hold out?" said Captain Roby tentatively.

"Yes," assented the colonel.

"And when they are ended," cried Dickenson, who had sat listening in silence, "we can try a bit of sport. There are herds of antelopes and flocks of guinea-fowl about, sir."

"I doubt it, Dickenson," said the colonel, smiling; "and I fancy that the most profitable form of sport for us will be that followed out by our mounted men."

"What's that, sir?" asked Dickenson.

"Stalking the enemy's convoys. These fellows have to be fed, hardy and self-supporting as they are. But there, we are pretty well supplied as yet, and the great thing is that our water-supply is never likely to fail."

The next morning the Boers made a fresh attack for the purpose of recapturing the gun or seizing the kopje where it was mounted. But this advance, like several more which followed, only resulted in a severe repulse, and at last their attacks formed part of a long blockade in which they hoped to succeed by starving the little British force into subjection.

Chapter Five.
The Boer Prisoners

It was to this village and kopje, turned after its long occupation into what proved to be an impregnable stronghold – one which so far, to the Boers' cost, maintained its promise – that Drew Lennox and Bob Dickenson returned after their unfortunate fishing expedition, the colonel, a bluff, sun-burnt, stern-looking officer, meeting them with a frown as they came up. "How many men hurt, Roby?" he said.

"Only one, sir. Dickenson had his ear nicked by a bullet."

"Humph! Might have been worse, my lad," said the colonel. "Show it to the doctor. – Where are your fish, Lennox?"

"In the river, sir," said the young officer, with a shrug of the shoulders. "How was that?"

The young man briefly explained, and the colonel nodded his head.

"Look here," he said, "we want some change from our monotonous fare; but if you two had come back loaded with salmon I should have forbidden any further fishing – so of course I do now. I can't afford to have my officers setting themselves up as butts for the Boers to practise at."

"We have taken fifteen prisoners and their horses, sir," interposed Captain Roby, making an effort to turn aside the

wrath of their chief.

"Yes, Mr Roby, I saw that you had some prisoners," replied the colonel meaningly; "but, excuse me, I had not finished addressing these two gentlemen."

"I beg pardon, sir."

"That will do," said the colonel. "There, I need say no more. Let's see the prisoners."

"I don't think I like fishing as a sport, Drew, old man," said Dickenson, rubbing his ear, and then wincing with pain. "Come on, and let's see the inspection of the enemy. But the boss needn't have been so gruff. We acted as bait, and he has caught fifteen Boers and their horses."

"And how are we to feed them all now we have got them?" said Lennox, with a quaint smile.

"Oh, that's what made the old man so waxy!" cried the other. "I see now. Well, let him set them up and have them shot."

"Of course; according to our merciless custom," said Lennox sarcastically; and directly after the two friends closed up to where the prisoners were being paraded, their horses, clever, wiry-looking little cobs, being led up behind them by some of the men.

It was almost the first time that the young men had been in such close contact with the sturdy, obstinate enemy they had so long kept at bay, and they stared eagerly at the rough, unshorn, ill-clad, farmer-like fellows, for the most part big-bearded, sun-tanned, and full of vigour, who met their gaze defiantly, but kept on directing uneasy glances at the other officers, more than

once looking eagerly at their led horses as if mentally weighing whether by a bold rush they could reach their steeds, spring upon them, and gallop away.

But a glance round showed them the impossibility of such a proceeding, for they were unarmed and surrounded by men with fixed bayonets, while, in addition, every pony had an armed man holding its bridle; and as their shifty eyes were turned from one to another in a questioning way, the prevailing thought seemed to be that any such proceeding would be mad in the extreme, and could only result in their being shot down.

The inspection did not take long, and the colonel turned away to confer with the group of officers who followed him.

"The sooner we get rid of these fellows the better," he said, "for we can't keep them here. What shall I do?" he continued, in response to a question from the major of the regiment. "Make them take the oaths to be on parole not to bear arms against us again?"

"Ready for them to go and break their word," grumbled the major.

"Of course; after what has passed we can't trust them a bit. But we can't keep them here an hour; half-an-hour is too much. They will see far more of our weakness and the state of our defences in five minutes than I like."

He turned to the heavy, big-bearded man who seemed to be the leader, and asked if he would take the oath not to fight against the Queen again.

The man started and looked relieved, for he grasped all that was said to him – words which came while he was still in doubt as to what their fate was to be, his ideas tending towards a volley of rifles fired at ten paces.

The next minute he was interpreting the colonel's words to his comrades in misfortune, and with a meaning smile each man willingly made the promise in Dutch that he would take no further part in the war.

"Look here," said the colonel to their leader; "make them fully understand that if they are again taken in arms against the Queen – "

"They have no Queen," said the Boer leader surlily. "This is the Transvaal Republic."

"Indeed!" said the colonel sternly. "This is not the Transvaal Republic, but a part of the British Dominions now; and remember that you all owe allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen-Empress, whose laws you have now sworn to obey."

The man scowled.

"And if, as I was telling you, any of you are again found fighting against our troops, you will not be treated as people at war against us, but as rebels liable to be tried by a short drum-head court-martial, and shot out of hand. Do you understand?"

The man nodded.

"Make your companions fully understand it too."

The Boer leader hesitated as if about to speak, but the colonel turned upon him sharply.

"Quick, sir," he cried; "I have no time to waste. Tell your companions this, so that there may be no mistake."

The man stepped back, and his followers pressed round him talking eagerly, several of them understanding English to some extent, and for a few minutes they conversed together excitedly, till, with a shrug of the shoulders, the principal Boer turned and advanced to the colonel.

"Well," said the latter, "do they fully grasp all this?"

"Oh yes; they know," replied the man sourly.

"That will do, then," said the colonel. "No; stop. You are no longer our enemies, and we have treated you well; henceforth act as friends. Go back to your farms, and collect and bring here corn, oxen, and sheep, as much as you like, and I will buy it of you at a good price."

The Boer brightened up at this.

"In money?" he said. "Not in paper orders?"

"In hard cash, my suspicious friend," said the colonel, with a look of contempt; "but it's time you had learnt that our government paper is as good as Transvaal gold."

"We will be paid in gold," said the Boer, with a peculiar smile.

"That will do, then," said the colonel. "Now you can go, and the sooner you set to work to teach your fellow-countrymen to respect the British Government the better for you all. Now, off at once."

The Boer rejoined his companions, talked with them for a few minutes, and returned.

"Back again?" said the colonel. "Well, what is it?"

"We are waiting to go," said the Boer coolly.

"Very well; the way is open," said the colonel. "Off with you, and think you are lucky that we do not keep you as prisoners."

As he spoke he pointed out towards the open veldt; but the Boer shook his head.

"Not that way," he said. "We want to cross the spruit to join our friends."

The colonel hesitated.

"Well," he said, turning to the major, "perhaps it is not fair to send them out on the karoo."

"But if you let them join their friends they will be fighting against us again to-morrow."

"So they will be," said the colonel grimly, "if we send them in the other direction. You don't suppose I have any faith in their parole, do you?"

"I did not know," said the major.

"There, I will send a picket with you to see you safely to the ford," said the colonel. "Now, off at once, and bring the forage as soon as you can."

"To-morrow or next night," said the Boer, with a nod.

"Here, Roby, send a sergeant's guard to see these people past the outposts. – Now, my good fellow, time is valuable here. Follow that gentleman, and he will see that you are safely passed through our lines. Well, what now?"

"You haven't given him orders to return us our horses and our

rifles."

"What!" cried the colonel.

"We can't get about without them," said the Boer coolly.

The colonel laughed.

"Well, of all the cool impudence!" he cried. "Why, you insolent dog!" he roared, "do you expect we are such children that we are going to give you the means of attacking us again directly you are safe? – Here, Roby, see these fellows out of the lines."

The colonel turned away and walked back to his quarters, followed by a torrent of abuse, which was promptly checked by Captain Roby, who gave his orders sharply, and the prisoners were marched off in front of the sergeant's guard with fixed bayonets.

But the incident was not quite at an end, for before a quarter of an hour had elapsed the crackling of rifle-fire was heard in the direction of the ford, towards which men were sent at once. The alarm soon died out on the cause being known, the sergeant reporting that he had approached the ford with the prisoners and displayed a flag of truce, which brought out a party of five or six dozen Boers upon the farther side of the river, into whose charge the prisoners were given. But no sooner were all across and seen to be talking to their friends than there was a rush for cover, and before the sergeant and the outposts stationed there could grasp what the movement meant the enemy's fire was opened upon them.

"Any one hurt, sergeant?" said Captain Roby.

"No, sir, wonderful to relate. Our lads were too sharp for them, and dropped at once. My heart rose to my mouth, sir, for I thought three of ours were hit; but it was only their sharpness, for they were returning the fire the next moment, and we kept it up as hot as the enemy did till they fell back."

"Quite time the Boers were taught the meaning of civilised war, Bob," said Lennox as they returned to their quarters.

"Quite; but I'm out of heart with them," replied Dickenson. "They're bad pupils – such a one-sided lot."

"What about the corn and sheep and beef those fellows are to bring to-morrow or next night?" said Lennox grimly.

"Well, what about it? I'm afraid they'll be too much offended with the colonel's treatment to come."

"Yes," said Lennox; "so am I."

Chapter Six.
Pleasant Supplies

Matters looked anything but hopeful at Groenfontein, though the men were full of spirits and eager to respond to any of the attacks made by the Boers, who, with three commandos, thoroughly shut them in, joining hands and completely cutting off all communication.

Time was gliding on without any sign of help from outside, and the beleaguered party would have concluded that they were quite forgotten by their friends if they had not felt certain that the different generals were fully engaged elsewhere.

"Let's see," said Lennox one evening; "we've been attacked every day since our fishing-trip."

"That's right; and the Boers have been beaten every day for a week."

"And yet they are as impudent as over. They think that we shall surrender as soon as we grow a little more hungry."

"Then they'll be sold," said Dickenson, "for the hungrier I grow the more savage and full of fight I get. You know about the old saying of some fellow, that when he had had a good dinner a child might play with him?"

"Oh yes, I know," said Lennox. "Well, these children of the desert had better not try to play with me."

"Ought to have a notice on you, 'Take care; he bites' – eh?" said Lennox merrily.

"'M, yes; something of the kind. I say, I wish, though, I could sleep without dreaming."

"Can't you?"

"No; it's horrible. I go to sleep directly I lie down, and then the game begins. I'm at Christmas dinners or banquets or parties, and the tables are covered with good things. Then either they've got no taste in them, or else as soon as I try to cut a slice or take up a mouthful in a spoon it's either snatched or dragged away."

"Oh, don't talk about food," said Lennox impatiently; "it makes me feel sick. There's one comfort, though."

"Is there?" cried Dickenson excitedly. "Where? Give us a bit."

"Nonsense! I mean we have plenty of that beautiful spring water."

"Ugh!" cried Dickenson, with a shudder. "Cold and clear, unsustaining. I saw some water once through a microscope, and it was full of live things twizzling about in all directions. That's the sort of water we want now – something to eat in it as well as drink."

Lennox made an irritable gesture.

"Talk about something else, man," he cried. "You think of nothing but eating and drinking."

"That's true, old man. Well, I'll say no more about drinking; but I wonder how cold roast prisoner would taste?"

"Bob!" shouted Lennox.

"Well, what shall I talk about?"

"Look about you. See how beautiful the kopjes and mountains look in the distance this evening; they seem to glow with orange and rose and gold."

"There you go again! You're always praising up this horrid place."

"Well, isn't it beautiful? See how clear the air is."

"I dare say. But I don't want clear air; I'd rather it was thick as soup if it tasted like it."

"Soup! There you go again. Think of how lovely it is down by the river."

"With the Boers popping at you? I say, this ear of mine doesn't heal up."

"You don't mind the doctor's orders."

"So much fighting to do; haven't time."

"But you grant it is beautiful down by the river?"

"Yes, where only man is vile – very vile indeed; does nothing all day but try to commit murder. But there, it's of no use for you to argue; I think South Africa is horrible. Look at the miles of wretched dusty desert and stony waste. I don't know what we English want with it."

"Room for our colonists, and to develop the mines. Look at the diamonds."

"Look at our sparkling sea at home."

"Look at the gold."

"I like looking at a good golden furzy common in Surrey. It's

of no use, Drew, my lad; it's a dismal, burning, freezing place."

"Why don't you throw it up and go home, then?"

"What! before we've beaten the Boers into a state of decency? No!"

Bob Dickenson's "No!" was emphatic enough for anything, and brought the conversation between the two young men to an end; for it was close upon the time for the mess dinner, which, whatever its shortcomings, as Bob Dickenson said, was jolly punctual, even if there was no tablecloth.

So they descended from where they had perched themselves close up to the big gun, where their commanding position gave them the opportunity for making a wide sweep round over the karoo, taking in, too, the wooded course of the river and the open country beyond in the possession of the Boers.

But they had seen no sign of an enemy or grazing horse; though they well knew that if a company of their men set off in any direction, before they had gone a quarter of a mile they would be pelted with bullets by an unseen foe.

They had seen the walls and rifle-pits which guarded the great gun so often that they hardly took their attention. All the same, though, soldier-like, Drew Lennox could not help thinking how naturally strong the kopje was, how easy it would be for two or three companies of infantry to hold it against a force of ten times their number, and what tremendous advantages the Boers had possessed in the nature of their country. For they had only had to sit down behind the natural fortifications and set an enemy at

defiance.

"It's our turn now," Lennox said to himself, "and we could laugh at them for months if only we had a supply of food."

"Let's try this way," said Dickenson, bearing off to his left.

"What for? It's five times as hard as the regular track, and precipitous."

"Not so bad but what we can do it. We can let one another down if we come to one of the wall-like bits too big to jump."

"But it's labour for nothing. Only make you more hungry," added Lennox, with a laugh.

"Never mind; I want to make sure that an enemy could not steal up in the dark and surprise the men in charge of the gun. I'm always thinking that the Boers will steal a march on us and take it some day."

"You might save yourself the trouble as far as the climbing up is concerned. This is the worst bit; but they could do it, I feel sure, if our sentries were lax. I don't think they'd get by them, though."

"Well, let's have a good look what it is like, now all the crags are lit up."

They were lit up in a most wonderful way by the sun, which was just about to dip below the horizon, and turned every lightning-shivered mass of tumbled-together rock into a glowing state, making it look as if it was red-hot, while the rifts and cracks which had been formed here and there were lit up so that their generally dark depths could be searched by the eye.

"Do you know what this place looks like?" said Dickenson.

"The roughest spot in the world," replied Drew as he lowered himself down a perpendicular, precipitous bit which necessitated his hanging by his hands, and then dropping four or five feet.

"No! It's just as if the giants of old had made a furnace at the top of the kopje, and had been pouring the red-hot clinkers down the side."

"Or as if it was the slope of a volcano, and those were the masses of pumice which had fallen and rolled down."

"So that we look like a couple of flies walking amongst lumps of sugar. Well, yours is a good simile, but not so romantic as mine. That's a deep crack, Drew, old chap. Like to see how far in it goes?"

"No, thanks. I want my dinner," said Lennox.

"Dinner! Mealie cake and tough stewed horse."

"Wrong," said Lennox; "it's beef to-night, for I asked."

"Beef! Don't insult the muscle-giving food of a Briton by calling tough old draught-ox beef. I don't know but what I would rather have a bit of *cheval—chevril*, or whatever they call it – if it wasn't for that oily fat. But we might as well peep in that crack. Perhaps there's a cavern."

"Not to-day, Bob. It's close upon mess-time."

"Hark at him! Prefers food for the body to food for the mind. Very well. Go on; I'm at your heels."

They descended to the more level part of the granite-strewn eminence, acknowledged the salutes of the sentries they passed, and soon after reached the mean-looking collection of tin houses

that formed the village – though there was very little tin visible, the only portion being a barricade or two formed of biscuit-tins, which had been made bullet-proof in building up a wall by filling them with earth or sand. The *tin* houses, according to the popular term, were really the common grey corrugated iron so easily riveted or screwed together into a hut, and forming outer and partition walls, and fairly rain-proof roofing, but as ugly in appearance as hot beneath the torrid sun.

Groenfontein consisted of a group of this class of house ranged about a wide market-square, while here and there outside were warehouses and sheds and a few farms.

Bob Dickenson said it was the ugliest and dirtiest place that ever called itself a town; and he was fairly right about the former. As to the latter, it might have been worse. Its greatest defect was the litter of old meat and other tins, while there were broken bottles enough to act as a defence when attacked by strangers.

The Boer inhabitants had for the most part fled; those who were left lived under the protection of the British force, which they preferred to being out on commando, using rifle, and risking their lives.

The empty houses left by the former inhabitants had at once been taken possession of for officers' and soldiers' quarters; the long warehouses and barns for stabling; and a big wool warehouse, happily containing many bales of wool, had been turned into mess and club room, the great bales making excellent couches, and others forming breastworks inside the windows and

the big double doors.

Here the officers off duty lounged and rested, and here upon this particular night they were gathered round the social board to dine, each officer with his own servant; and it is worthy of remark that with officer and man, rifle, revolver, and sword were racked close at hand.

"Round the social board" is a most appropriate term, though not quite correct; for, while social in the highest degree, quite a brotherly spirit influencing the officers present, the board was really two, held together by a couple of cross-pieces and laid upon barrels, while the seats were of all kinds, from cartridge-boxes to up-ended flour-barrels, branded *Na*. and *Pa*. and *Va*., and various other contractions of long-sounding United States names, which indicated where the fine white flour they once contained had been grown and ground.

The mess cook had done the best he could, and provided some excellent bread, but it was rather short in quantity. As to the meat, it was hot; but there were no dish-covers, which Bob Dickenson said did not matter in the least, for during the past few weeks they had been careful to draw a veil over the food.

But of water, such as needed no filtering, there was ample, ready for quaffing out of tin mug, silver flask, cup, or horn.

"And the beauty of our tipple now is," said Bob, "that it never does a fellow the least harm."

It was a favourite remark of his, "an impromptu" that had been much admired. He made the remark again on this particular

evening, but his tones sounded dismal.

"It's a great blessing, though," he added; "we might have none. Yes, capital water," he continued, draining his cup and setting it down with a rap on his part of the board. "Just think, Drew, old man, we might be forced to sit here drinking bad champagne."

"I don't want to drink bad or good champagne, old fellow," said Lennox; "but I do wish we had a barrel of good, honest, home-brewed British ale, with – "

"A brace of well-roasted pheasants between us two – eh?"

"No; I was going to say, a good crusty loaf and a cut off a fine old Stilton cheese."

"J-Ja!" sighed the next man.

"Never mind, gentlemen," said the colonel; "what we have will do to work upon. When we've done our work, and get back home, I'll be bound to say that John Bull will ask us to dinner oftener than will do us good. What do you say, doctor?"

"What do I say, Colonel Lindley?" cried the doctor, putting down his flask-cup. "I say this Spartan fare agrees with us all admirably. Look round the table, and see what splendid condition we are all in. A bit spare, but brown, wiry, and active as men can be. Never mind the food. You are all living a real life on the finest air I ever breathed. We are all pictures of health now; and where I have a wound to deal with it heals fast – a sure sign that the patient's flesh is in a perfect state."

"It's all very fine," said Bob Dickenson in a low voice to those about him. "Old Bolus keeps himself up to the mark by taking

nips; that's why he's so well and strong."

"Nonsense!" said Lennox sharply. "I don't believe he ever touches spirits except as a medicine."

"Who said he did?" growled Dickenson.

"You, Bob; we all heard you," chorused several near.

"Take my oath I never mentioned spirits. I said *nips*."

"Well, you meant them," said Lennox.

"I didn't. Don't you jump at conclusions, Drew, old man. I meant nips of tonics. Old M.D. has got a lot of curious chemicals in that medicine-chest of his, and when he's a bit down he takes nips of them."

"I don't believe it," said a brother officer, laughing. "Old Emden, M.D., take his own physic? Too clever for that!"

The darkness had closed in soon after the officers had taken their seats – early, after tropic fashion – and one of the messmen had lit four common-looking paraffin-lamps, which swung from the rafters, smelt vilely of bad spirit, and smoked and cast down a dismal light; but the men were in high spirits, chatting away, and the meal being ended, many of them had started pipes or rolled up cigarettes, when an orderly was seen to enter by the door nearest the colonel's seat and make quickly for his place.

There was a cessation of the conversation on the instant, and one motion made by every officer present – he glanced at the spot where his sword and revolver hung, while their servants turned their eyes to the rifle-stands and bandoliers, listening intently for the colonel's next order: for the coming of the orderly could only

mean one thing under their circumstances – an advance of the Boers.

They were right. But the increased action of their pulses began to calm down again; for instead of standing up according to his wont and giving a few short, sharp orders, the colonel, after turning towards the orderly and hearing him out, merely raised his eyes and smiled.

"Wonders will never cease, gentlemen," he said, and he sent a soft, grey cloud of cigarette smoke upward towards the roof of the barn. "You all remember our prisoners, brought in after Lennox and Dickenson's fishing expedition?"

There was an eager chorus of "Yes" from all present save the two young officers mentioned, and they were too eager in listening to speak.

"Well, gentlemen, I told those men that the wisest thing they could do was to go back to their farms, give up fighting, and collect and bring into camp here a good supply of corn and beef."

"Yes, sir, I heard you," said Captain Roby, for the colonel paused to take two or three whiffs from his cigarette.

"Well, gentlemen, you will hardly credit the news I have received when you recall what took place, and be ready to place some faith in a Boer's sound common-sense."

"Why doesn't he speak out at once?" said Dickenson in a whisper. "Who wants all this rigmarole of a preface?"

"What is it, colonel?" said the major.

"That Boer, the leader of the little party of prisoners, evidently

took my advice," continued the colonel; "and instead of rejoining his fighting friends, he has gone back to the ways of peace and trade, and they have just arrived at the outposts with a couple of wagon-loads of grain, a score of sheep, and ten oxen."

The news was received with a shout, and as soon as silence was obtained the colonel continued: "It seems incredible; but, after all, it is only the beginning of what must come to pass. For, once the Boer is convinced that it is of no use to fight, he will try his best to make all he can out of his enemies."

"Well, it's splendid news," said the major; "but what about its being some cunning trap?"

"That is what I am disposed to suspect," said the colonel; "so, quietly and without stir, double the outposts, send word to the men on the kopje to be on the alert, and let everything, without any display of force, be ready for what may come. You, Captain Roby, take half a company to meet our visitors, and bring the welcome provender into the market-place here."

"Bob," whispered Lennox, "if we could only go with Roby! There'll be a couple of score of the enemy hiding amongst those sacks."

"Get out!" responded Dickenson. "I never did see such an old cock-and-bull inventor as you are. It's stale, too. You're thinking of the old story of the fellows who took the castle by riding in a wagon loaded with grass and them underneath. Then it was driven in under the portcullis, which was dropped at the first alarm, and came down chop on the wagon and would go no

farther, while the fellows hopped out through the grass and took the castle. Pooh! What's the good of being so suspicious? These Boers are tired of fighting, and they've taken the old man's advice about trade."

"I don't believe it," said Lennox firmly. "I wouldn't trust the Boers a bit."

"Well, don't believe it, then; but let's go and see what they've brought, all the same."

"Yes, certainly; but let's put the colonel on his guard."

"What! Go and tell him what you think?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks, no, dear boy. I have only one nose, and I want it."

"What do you mean?" said Lennox sharply.

"Don't want it snapped off, as they say. The idea of the cheek – going and teaching our military grandmother – father, I mean, how to suck eggs!"

"You never will believe till the thing's rammed down your throat," said Lennox angrily. "Well, come along as we have no orders."

And without further discussion the two young men buckled on their belts and followed Captain Roby, who, while the colonel's other instructions were being carried out, marched his men down to where some of the Boer party, well-guarded by the outposts, could be dimly seen squatted about or seated on the fronts of two well-loaded wagons, whose teams were tying down contentedly chewing the cud. Four more Boers kept the sheep and oxen in

the rear of the wagons from straying away in search of a place to graze, for there was a tempting odour of fresh green herbage saluting their nostrils, along with the pleasant moisture rising from the trickling water hurrying away towards the gully where it found its way into the river.

"What do you say to telling Roby to set a man to probe the sacks with a fixed bayonet?"

"It would be wise," whispered back Lennox.

"Tchah!" sneered Dickenson. "How could a fellow exist under one of those sacks of corn? Why, they must weigh on to a couple of hundredweight."

"I don't care; there's some dodge, Bob, I'm sure."

"Artful dodge, of course. Here, let's see if we know the fellows again."

"Very well; but be on your guard."

"Bother! Roby and his men will mind we are not hurt."

As he spoke Dickenson led the way close up to the roughly-clad Boers about the wagons, where, in spite of the darkness, the face of their leader was easy to make out as he sat pulling away at a big German pipe well-filled with a most atrociously bad tobacco, evidently of home growth and make.

"Hullo, old chap!" said Dickenson heartily; "so you've thought better of it?"

The Boer looked at him sharply, and, recognising the speaker, favoured him with a nod.

"Brought us some provender?" continued Dickenson; and he

received another nod.

"What have you got?"

The Boer wagged his head sidewise towards the wagons and herds, and went on smoking.

"Well done; that's better than trying to pot us. But, I say, what about your commando fellows? What will they say when you go back?"

The Boer took his pipe out of his mouth and stuffed a finger into the bowl to thrust down the loose tobacco.

"Nothing," he said shortly. "Not going back."

"What!" cried Lennox, joining in after pretty well satisfying himself that there could be no danger in the unarmed Boers and their wagons.

"What's what?" said the Boer sourly.

"You're not going back?" cried Dickenson, staring.

"Well, we can't go back, of course. If we tried they'd shoot us, wouldn't they?"

The reply seemed to be unanswerable, and Dickenson merely uttered a grunt, just as Captain Roby and his men marched up to form an escort for the little convoy.

"Well, commandant?" he said.

The Boer grunted. "Not commandant," he said; "field-cornet."

"Very well, field-cornet; how did you manage to get here?"

"'Cross the veldt," growled the man.

"Didn't you see any of your friends?"

"No," grumbled the Boer. "If we had we shouldn't be here. Have you got the money for what we've got?"

"No."

"Stop, then. We're not going on."

"But you must now. The colonel will give you an order."

"Paper?" said the Boer sharply.

"Yes."

"Then we don't go."

"Yes, you do, my obstinate friend. It will be an order to an official here, and he'll pay you a fair price at once – in gold."

"My price?"

"Oh, that I can't say," replied the captain. "But I promise you will be fairly dealt with."

The Boer put his burning pipe in his pocket, snatched off his battered slouch felt hat, and gave his shaggy head an angry rub, looking round at his companions as if for support, and then staring back at the way they had come, to see lanterns gleaming and the glint of bayonets dimly here and there, plainly showing him that retreat was out of the question. Then, like some bear at bay, he uttered what sounded like a low growl, though in fact it was only a remark to the man nearest to him, a similar growl coming in reply.

"Come, sir, no nonsense," said the captain sternly. "You have come to sell, I suppose?"

"I shouldn't be here if I hadn't," growled the Boer.

"Then come along. You cannot go back now. I have told you

that you will be well treated. Please to recollect that if our colonel chose he could commando everything you have brought for the use of our force; but he prefers to treat all of your people who bring supplies as straightforward traders. Now come along."

The Boer grunted, glanced back once more, and at last, as if he had thoroughly grasped his position, said a few words to his nearest companions and passed the word to trek, when, in answer to the crack of the huge whip, the bullocks sprang to their places along the trek-tows, the wagons creaked and groaned, and the little convoy was escorted into the market-place, where, as soon as he saw him, the field-cornet made for the colonel's side and began like one with a grievance.

But the amount of cash to be paid was soon settled, and the Boer's objections died away. The only difficulty then left was about the Boers' stay.

"If we go back they'll shoot us," he said to the colonel. "We've brought you the provisions you asked for, and when you've eaten all you'll want more, and we'll go and fetch everything; but you must have us here now."

"My good sir," said the colonel, to the intense amusement of the officers assembled, who enjoyed seeing their chief, as they termed him, in a corner, "I have enough mouths to feed here; you must go back to the peaceable among your own people."

"Peaceable? There are none peaceable now. Look here: do you want to send us back to fight against you?" cried the Boer cornet indignantly.

"Certainly not," said the colonel; "and I would not advise you to, for your own sake."

"Then what are we to do? We got away with these loads of mealies, but it will be known to-morrow. We can't go back, and it's all your doing."

"Well, I confess that it is hard upon you," said the colonel; "but, as I have told you, I am not going to take the responsibility of feeding more mouths."

"But we've just brought you plenty."

"Which will soon be gone," cried the colonel.

"Oh, that's nothing," said the Boer, with a grin full of cunning; "we know where to get plenty more."

The colonel turned and looked at the major, who returned the look with interest, for these last words opened up plenty of possibilities for disposing of a terrible difficulty in the matter of supplies.

"I don't much like the idea, major," he said in a low tone.

"No; couldn't trust the fellow," was the reply. "May be a ruse."

"At the same time it may be simple fact," continued the colonel. "Of course he would be well aware of the whereabouts of stores, for the enemy always seem to have abundance. But no; it would be too great a risk."

"All the same, though," said the major, who afterwards confessed to visions of steaks and roast mutton floating before his mind, "the fellow would be forced to be honest with us, for he would be holding his life by a very thin thread."

"Exactly," said the colonel eagerly. "We could let him know that at the slightest suggestion of treachery we should shoot him and his companions without mercy."

"Make him understand that," said the major; and while the Boer party stood waiting and watching by the two wagons, which had been drawn into the square, a little council of war was held by the senior officers, in which the pros and cons were discussed.

"It's a dangerous proceeding," said the colonel, in conclusion; "but one thing is certain – we cannot hold this place long without food, and it is all-important that it should be held, so we must risk it. Perhaps the fellows are honest after all. If they are not – "

"Yes," said the major, giving his chief a meaning look; "if they are not – "

And the unfinished sentence was mentally taken up by the other officers, both Lennox and Dickenson looking it at one another, so to speak.

Then the colonel turned to the Boer cornet.

"Look here, sir," he said; "I am a man of few words, but please understand that I mean exactly what I say. You and your companions can stay here upon the condition that you are under military rule. Your duty will be to forage for provisions when required. You will be well treated, and have the same rations as the men; but you will only leave the place when my permission is given, and I warn you that if any of you are guilty of an act that suggests you are playing the spy, it will mean a spy's fate. You know what I mean?"

"Oh, of course I do," growled the Boer. "Just as if it was likely! You don't seem to have a very good opinion of us burghers."

"You have not given us cause to think well of you," said the colonel sternly. "Now we understand each other. But of course you will have to work with the men, and now you had better help to unload the wagons."

The cornet nodded, and turned to his companions, who had been watching anxiously at a little distance; and as soon as they heard the colonel's verdict they seemed at ease.

A few minutes later the regimental butchers had taken charge of one of the oxen and a couple of sheep, whose fate was soon decided in the shambles, and the men gathered round to cheer at the unwonted sight of the carcasses hung up to cool.

Meanwhile an end of one of the warehouses had been set apart for the new supply of grain, and the Boers worked readily enough with a batch of the soldiers at unloading and storing, with lanterns hung from the rafters to gleam on the bayonets of the appointed guard, the sergeant and his men keeping a strict lookout, in which they were imitated by the younger officers, Lennox and Dickenson waiting, as the latter laughingly said, for the smuggled-in Boers, who of course did not appear.

Lennox made it his business to stand close to the tail-board of one of the wagons, in which another lantern was hung, and with the sergeant he gave every sack a heavy punch as it was dragged to the edge ready for the Boers to shoulder and walk off into the magazine.

Seeing this, the Boer chief, now all smiles and good humour, made for the next sack, untied the tarred string which was tied round the mouth, opened it, and called to the sergeant to stand out of the light.

"I want the officers to see what beautiful corn it is," he said.

The sergeant reached up into the wagon-tilt to lift down the lantern from where he had hung it to one of the tilt-bows.

"No, no," cried the Boer; "you needn't do that, boss. They can see. There," he cried, thrusting in both hands and scooping as much as he could grasp, and letting the glistening yellow grains fall trickling back in a rivulet again and again. "See that? Hard as shot. Smell it. Fresh. This year's harvest. I know where there's enough to feed four or five thousand men."

"Yes, it looks good," said Dickenson, helping himself to a handful, and putting a grain into his mouth. "Sweet as a nut, Drew, but as hard as flint. Fine work for the teeth."

"Yes," said the Boer, grinning. "You English can't grind that up with your teeth. Wait till it's boiled, though, or pounded up and made into mealie. Ha! Make yours skins shine like the Kaffirs'."

"You don't want these sacks back, I suppose?" said the sergeant who was superintending. "Because if you do I'd better have them emptied."

"Oh no, oh no," said the Boer. "Keep it as it is; it will be cleaner."

"Why are some of the sacks tied up with white string and some with black?" said Lennox suddenly.

"Came from different farms," said the Boer, who overheard the remark. "Here, I'll open that one; it's smaller corn."

He signed to one of his fellows to set down the sack he was about to shoulder, and opening it, he went through the same performance again, shovelling up the yellow grain with his hands. "Not quite so good as the other sort," he said; "it's smaller, but it yields better in the fields."

"Humph! I don't see much difference in it," said Lennox, taking up a few grains and following his friend's example.

"No?" said the Boer, chuckling as he scooped up a double handful and tossed it up, to shine like gold in the light. "You are not a farmer, and have not grown thousands of sacks of it. I have."

He drew the mouth of the sack together again and tied it with its white string, when it too was borne off through the open doorway to follow its predecessors.

"That roof sound?" said the Boer, pointing up at the corrugated iron sheeting.

"Oh yes, that's all right," said the sergeant.

"Good," said the Boer. "Pity to let rain come through on grain like that. Make it swell and shoot."

The first wagon was emptied and the second begun, the Boers working splendidly till it was nearly emptied; and then the cornet turned to Captain Roby.

"Don't you want some left out," he said, "to use at once?"

"Yes," said the captain; "leave out six, and we'll hand them over to the bakers and cooks."

Three of the white-tied and three of the black-tied sacks were selected by the field-cornet, who told his men to shoulder them, and they were borne off at once to the iron-roofed hut which was used as a store. Then the wagons being emptied, they were drawn on one side, and the captain turned to consult Lennox about what hut was to be apportioned to the Boers for quarters.

"Why not make them take to the wagons?" said Dickenson.

"Not a bad notion," replied Captain Roby; and just at that moment, well buttoned up in their greatcoats – for the night was cold – the colonel and major came round.

"Where are you going to quarter these men, Roby?" said the former.

"Mr Dickenson here, sir, has just suggested that they shall keep to their wagons."

"Of course," said the colonel; "couldn't be better. They'll be well under observation, major – eh?"

"Yes," said that officer shortly; and it was announced to the field-cornet that his party were to make these their quarters.

This was received with a smile of satisfaction, the Boers dividing into two parties, each going to a wagon quite as a matter of course, and taking a bag from where it hung.

Ten minutes later they had dipped as much fresh water as they required from the barrels that swung beneath, and were seated, knife in hand, eating the provisions they had brought with them, while when the colonel and major came round again it was to find the lanterns out, the Dutchmen in their movable quarters,

some smoking, others giving loud announcement that they were asleep, and close at hand and with all well under observation a couple of sentries marching up and down.

"I think they're honest," said the colonel as the two officers walked away.

"I'm beginning to think so too," was the reply.

A short time before, Lennox and his companion had also taken a farewell glance at the bearers of so valuable an adjunct to the military larder, and Dickenson had made a similar remark to that of his chief, but in a more easy-going conversational way.

"Those chaps mean to be square, Drew, old man," he said.

"Think so?"

"Yes; so do you. What else could they mean?"

"To round upon us."

"How? What could they do?"

"Get back to their people and speak out, after spying out the weakness of the land."

"Pooh! What good would that do, you suspicious old scribe? Their account's right enough; they proved it by the plunder they brought and their eagerness to sack as much tin as they could for it."

"I don't know," said Lennox; "the Boers are very slim."

"Mentally – granted; but certainly not bodily, old man. Bah! Pitch it over; you suspect every thing and everybody. I know you believe I nobbled those last cigarettes of yours."

"So you did."

"Didn't," said Dickenson, throwing himself down upon the board which formed his bed, for they had returned to their quarters. "You haven't a bit of faith in a fellow."

"Well, the cigarettes were on that shelf the night before last, and the next morning they were gone."

"In smoke," said Dickenson, with a yawn.

"There, what did I say?"

"You said I took them, and I didn't; but I've a shrewd suspicion that I know who did smoke them."

"Who was it?" said Lennox shortly.

"You."

"I declare I didn't."

"Declare away, old man. I believe you went to sleep hungry."

"Oh yes, you may believe that, and add 'very' to it. Well, what then?"

"You went to sleep, began dreaming, and got up and smoked the lot in your sleep."

"You're five feet ten of foolishness," said Lennox testily as he lay down in his greatcoat.

"And you're an inch in height less of suspicion," said Dickenson, and he added a yawn.

"Well, hang the cigarettes! I am tired. I say, I'm glad we have no posts to visit to-night."

"Hubble, bubble, burr," – said Dickenson indistinctly.

"Bah! what a fellow you are to sleep!" said Lennox peevishly. "I wanted to talk to you about – about – about – "

Nothing; for in another moment he too was asleep and dreaming that the Boers had bounded out of their wagons, overcome the sentries, seized their rifles, and then gone on from post to post till all were well armed. After that they had crept in single file up the kopje, mastered the men in charge of the captured gun, and then tied the two trek-tows together and carried it off to their friends, though he could not quite settle how it was they got the two spans of oxen up among the rocks ready when required.

Not that this mattered, for when he woke in the morning at the reveille and looked out the oxen were absent certainly, being grazing in the river grass in charge of a guard; but the Boers were present, lighting a fire and getting their morning coffee ready, the pots beginning to send out a fragrant steam.

Chapter Seven.
Friends on the Forage

There were too many "alarums and excursions" at Groenfontein for much more thought to be bestowed upon the friendly Boers, as the party of former prisoners were termed, in the days which ensued. "Nobody can say but what they are quiet, well-behaved chaps," Bob Dickenson said, "for they do scarcely anything but sit and smoke that horrible nasty-smelling tobacco of theirs all day long. They like to take it easy. They're safe, and get their rations. They don't have to fight, and I don't believe nine-tenths of the others do; but they are spurred on – sjambokked on to it. Pah! what a language! Sjambok! why can't they call it a whip?"

"But I don't trust them, all the same," said Lennox. "I quite hate that smiling field-cornet, who's always shifting and turning the corn-sacks to give them plenty of air, as he says, to keep the grain from heating."

"Why, he hasn't been at it again, has he?" said Dickenson, laughing.

"At it again?" said Lennox. "What do you mean?"

"Did he shout to you to come and look at it?"

"Yes; only this morning, when the colonel was going by. Asked us to go in and look, and shovelled up the yellow corn in

one of the sacks. He made the colonel handle some of it, and pointed out that he was holding back the corn tied up with the white strings because it lasted better."

"What did the old man say?"

"Told him that, as the stock was getting so low, he and his men must make a raid and get some more."

"And what did Blackbeard say?"

"Grumbled and shook his head, and talked about the danger of being shot by his old friends if they were caught."

"Dodge, of course, to raise his price."

"That's what the colonel said; and he told him that there must be no nonsense – he was fed here and protected so that he should keep up the supply, and that he must start the day after to-morrow at the latest to buy up more and bring it in. Then, in a surly, unwilling way, he consented to go."

"Buy up some more?" said Dickenson, with a chuckle. "Yes, he'll buy a lot. Commando it, he'll call it."

That very day, growing weary of trying to starve out the garrison, the enemy made an attack from the south, and after a furious cannonading began to fall back in disorder, drawing out the mounted men and two troops of lancers in pursuit.

As they fell back the disorder seemed to become a rout; but Colonel Lindley had grown, through a sharp lesson or two, pretty watchful and ready to meet manoeuvre with manoeuvre. He saw almost directly that the enemy were overdoing their retreat; and he acted accordingly. Suspecting that it was a feint, he held his

mounted troops in hand, and then made them fall back upon the village.

It was none too soon, his men being just in time to fall on the flank of one of the other two commandos, whose leaders had only waited till the first had drawn the British force well out of their entrenchments before one attacked from the east, and the other drove back the defenders of the ford and crossed at once, but only to bring themselves well under the attention of their own captured gun on the kopje, its shells playing havoc amongst them, while the men of the colonel's regiment stood fast in their entrenchments. The result was that in less than an hour the last two commandos retired in disorder and with heavy loss.

"There," said Lennox as the events of the day were being discussed after the mess dinner, "you see, Bob, it doesn't do to trust the Boers."

"Pooh!" replied the young officer. "There are Boers and Boers, and one must trust them when they supply the larder. Good-luck to our lot, I say, and may they bring in another big supply. If they don't, we shall have to begin on those quadrupedal locomotives of horn, gristle, and skin they call spans. Ugh! how I do loathe trek ox!"

"Talking of that," said Lennox, "the cornet and his men ought to have been off to-night."

"Why?" said Dickenson, staring.

"Why? Because the enemy will be in such a state of confusion after the check they had to-day."

"To be sure; let's go and tell them so."

"I was nearly suggesting it to the colonel, but he would only have given me one of his looks. You know."

"Yes; make you feel as if you're nine or ten, even if he hadn't sarcastically hinted that you had not been asked for your advice. But I say, Drew, old fellow, I think you're right, and if Blackbeard thinks it would be best he'll go to the old man like a shot. No bashfulness in him."

Without further debate the two young men made their way across the market-square to the wagon where the Boers' dim lantern was swinging, passing two sentries on the way.

"Not much need for a light," observed Dickenson; "one might smell one's way to their den. Hang it all! if tobacco's poison those fellows ought to have been killed long ago."

The cornet was seated on the wagon-box, with his legs inside, talking in a low tone to his fellows who shared the wagon with him, and so intent that he did not hear the young officers' approach till Lennox spoke, when he sprang forward into the wagon, and his companions began to climb out at the back.

"Why, what's the matter with you?" said Dickenson laughingly as he stepped up and looked in. "Think some of your friends were coming to fetch you?"

"You crept up so quietly," grumbled the Boer, recovering himself, and calling gently to his companions to return.

"Quietly? Of course. You didn't want us to send a trumpeter before us to say we were coming, did you?"

"H'm! No. What were you doing? Listening to find out whether we were going to run away?"

"Psh! No!" cried Dickenson. "Here, Mr Lennox wants to say something to you."

"What about?" said the man huskily.

"I have been thinking that, as you are going on a foraging expedition," said Lennox, "you ought to go at once. It's a very dark night, and the enemy is completely demoralised by to-day's fight."

"Demoralised?" said the Boer.

"Well, scared – beaten – all in disorder."

"Oh," said the Boer, nodding his head like an elephant. "But what difference does that make?"

"They would not be so likely to notice your wagons going through their lines."

"Oh?" said the Boer.

"We think it would be a good chance for you."

"Does your general say so?"

"No; our *colonel* does not know that we have come."

"So! Yes, I see," said the Boer softly.

"We think you ought to take advantage of their disorder and get through to-night."

"Hah! Yes."

"You have only to go and see what the colonel says."

"Why don't you go?" said the Boer suspiciously.

"Because we think it would be better for you to go."

"And fall into the Boers' hands and be shot?"

"Bother!" cried Dickenson. "Why, you are as suspicious as – as – well, as some one I know. Now, my good fellow, don't you know that we've eaten the sheep?"

"Yes, I know that," said the Boer.

"Finished the last side of the last ox?"

"Yes, I know that too," replied the Boer, nodding his head slowly and sagely.

"And come down to the last ten sacks of the Indian corn?"

"Mealies? Yes, I know that too."

"Well, in the name of all that's sensible, why should we want to get you taken by your own people?"

"To be sure; I see now," said the cornet. "Better for us to get the wagons full again, and drive in some more sheep and oxen."

"Of course."

"Well, I don't know," said the man thoughtfully. "They will be all on the lookout, thinking that you will attack them in the night, and twice as watchful. I don't know, though. There is no moon to-night, and it will be black darkness."

"It is already," said Dickenson.

"Ha! Yes," said the Boer quietly, and he puffed at his pipe, which, after dropping in his fright, he had picked up, refilled, and relit at the lantern door. "Yes, that is a very good way. I shall go and tell the colonel that we will go to-night. You will come with me?"

"No," said Lennox; "the colonel does not like his young

officers to interfere. It would be better for you to go."

"Your chief is right," said the Boer firmly. "He thinks and acts for himself. I do the same. I do not let my men tell me what I should do." He spoke meaningly, as if he were giving a side-blow at some one or other of his companions. "I think much and long, and when I have thought what is best I tell them what to do, and they do it. Yes, I will go to the colonel now and speak to him. Wait here."

"No," said Dickenson quietly. "Go, and we will come back and hear what the colonel thinks."

The Boer nodded, thrust his pipe in the folds of the tilt, after tapping out the ashes, and went off, the two officers following him at a distance before stopping short, till they heard him challenged by a sentry, after which they struck off to their left to pass by the corn store, and being challenged again and again as they made a short tour round by the officers' quarters, going on the farther side of the corrugated iron huts and the principal ones, four close together, which were shared by the colonel, the doctor, and some of the senior officers. As they passed the back of the colonel's quarters there was the faint murmur of voices, one of which sounded peculiarly gruff, Dickenson said.

"Nonsense! You couldn't distinguish any difference at this distance," said Lennox. "Come along; we don't want to play eavesdroppers."

"Certainly not on a wet night when the rain is rattling down on those roofs and pouring off the eaves in cascades," replied

Dickenson; “but I never felt so strong a desire to listen before. Wonder what the old man is saying to our smoky friend.”

“Talking to the point, you may be sure, my lad,” replied Lennox. “I say, though, he is safe to tell Lindley that I suggested it.”

“Well, what of that?”

“Suppose the expedition turns out a failure, and they don’t get back with the forage?”

“Ha! Bad for you, old man,” said Dickenson, chuckling. “Why, we shall all be ready to eat you. Pity, too, for you’re horribly skinny.”

“Out upon you for a gluttonous-minded cannibal,” said Lennox merrily. “Well, there, I did it for the best. But I say, Bob, we’ve come all this way round the back of the houses here, and haven’t been challenged once.”

“What of that? There are sentries all round the market-square.”

“Yes; but out here. Surely a man or two ought to be placed somewhere about?”

“Oh, hang it all, old fellow! the boys are harassed to death with keeping post. You can’t have all our detachment playing at sentry-go. Come along. There’s no fear of the enemy making a night attack: that’s the only good thing in fighting Boers.”

“I don’t see the goodness,” said Lennox rather gloomily.

“Ah, would you!” cried Dickenson. “None of that! It’s bad enough to work hard, sleep hard, and eat hard.”

"I always thought you liked to eat hard," said Lennox.

"Dear me: a joke!" said Dickenson. "Very bad one, but it's better than going into the dumps. As I was about to say, we've got trouble enough without your playing at being in low spirits."

"Go on. What were you going to say?"

"I was going to remark that the best of fighting the Boers is, that they won't stir towards coming at us without they've got the daylight to help them to shoot. We ought to do more in the way of night surprises. I like the mystery and excitement of that sort of thing."

"I don't," said Lennox shortly. "It always seems to me cowardly and un-English to steal upon sleeping people, rifle and bayonet in hand."

"Well, 'pon my word, we've got into a nice line of conversation," said Dickenson. "Here we are, back in the market-square, brilliantly lighted by two of the dimmest lanterns that were ever made, and sentries galore to take care of us. Wonder whether Blackbeard has finished his confab with the chief?"

"Let's go and see," said Lennox, and he walked straight across, answering the sentry's challenge, and finding the Boer back in his former place, seated upon the wagon-box, and conversing in a low tone with the men within.

He did not start when Lennox spoke to him this time, but swung himself deliberately round to face his questioner.

"Well," said the latter, "what did the colonel say?"

"He said it was a good thing, and that we should take our

wagons, inspan, and be passed through the lines to-night."

"Oh, come," said Dickenson; "that's good! One to us."

"Yes," grunted the Boer after puffing away; "he said it was very good, and that we were to go."

"Then, why in the name of common-sense don't you get ready and go instead of sitting here smoking and talking?"

"Oh, we know, the colonel and I," said the man quietly. "We talked it over with the major and captains and another, and we all said that the Boers would be looking sharp out in the first part of the night, expecting to be attacked; but as they were not they would settle down, and that it would be best to wait till half the night had passed, and go then. There would be three hours' darkness, and that would be plenty of time to get well past the Boer laagers before the sun rose; so we are resting till then."

"That's right enough," said Dickenson, "so good-night, and luck go with you! Bring twice as many sheep this time."

"Yes, I know, captain," said the Boer. "And wheat and rice and coffee and sugar."

"Here, come along, Drew, old fellow; he's making my mouth water so dreadfully that I can't bear it."

"You will come and see us go?" said the Boer.

"No, thank you," replied Dickenson. "I hope to be sleeping like a sweet, innocent child. – You'll see them off, Drew?"

"No. I expect that they will be well on their way by the time I am roused up to visit posts. – Good-night, cornet. I hope to see you back safe."

"Oh yes, we shall be quite safe," said the man; "but perhaps it will be three or four days before we get back. Good-night, captains."

"Lieutenants!" cried Dickenson, and he took his comrade's arm, and they marched away to their quarters, heartily tired out, and ready to drop asleep on the instant as weary people really can.

Chapter Eight.
"Run, Sir, for your Life!"

"Eh? Yes. All right," cried Lennox, starting up, ready dressed as he was, to find himself half-blinded by the light of the lantern held close over him. "Time, sergeant?"

"Well, not quite, sir; but I want you to come and have a look at something."

"Something wrong?" cried the young officer, taking his sword and belt, which were handed to him by the non-com, and rapidly buckling up.

"Well, sir, I don't know about wrong; but it don't look right."

"What is it?"

"Stealing corn, I call it, sir; and it's being done in a horrid messy way, too."

"What! from the stores?"

"Yes, sir," said the man; "but come and look."

"Ready," said Lennox, taking out and examining his revolver, and then thrusting it back into its holster.

The next minute, after a glance at Dickenson, who was sleeping peacefully enough, Lennox was following the sergeant, whose dim lantern shed a curious-looking halo in the black darkness. Then as they passed a sentry another idea flashed across the young officer's confused brain, brought forth by the

sight of the guard, for on looking beyond the man there was no sign of the Boers' lantern hanging from the front bow of their wagon-tilts.

"What about the Boers?" he said sharply.

"Been gone about an hour, sir. I suppose it was all right? Captain Roby saw them start."

"Oh yes, it is quite right," said Lennox. "Now then, what about this corn? Some of the Kaffirs been at it?"

"What do you think, sir?" said the man, holding down the lantern to shed its light upon the ground, as they reached the open door of the store and showed a good sprinkling of the bright yellow grains scattered about to glisten in the pale light.

"Think? Well, it's plain enough," said Lennox. "Thieves have been here."

"Yes, sir. The open door took my notice at once. That chap ought to have seen it; but he didn't, or he'd have given the alarm."

"Go on," said Lennox, and he followed the man right into the barn-like building, to stop short in front of the first of the half-dozen or so of sacks at the end, this having been thrown down and cut right open, so that a quantity of the maize had gushed out and was running like fine shingle on to the floor.

"Kaffirs' work," said Lennox sharply.

"Well, sir, if I may give you my opinion I should say it was those Boers," said the sergeant gruffly.

"What!"

"Man must eat, sir, and it strikes me that they, in their easy-

going way, thought it was as much theirs as ours, and helped theirselves to enough to last them till they could get more."

"Well, whoever has done it," – began Lennox.

Then he stopped short, and took a step forward. "Here, sergeant," he cried, "hold the light higher."

This was done, and then the pair bent down quickly over the sacks, each uttering an angry ejaculation.

"Why, it's sheer mischief, sergeant," cried Lennox. "Done with a sharp knife evidently."

For the light now revealed something which the darkness had hitherto hidden from their notice. Another sack had been ripped up, apparently with a sharp knife, from top nearly to bottom. Another was in the same condition, and a little further investigation showed that every one had been cut, so that, on the farther side where all had been dark, there was a slope of the yellow grain which had flowed out, leaving the sacks one-third empty.

"Well, this is a rum go, sir," said the sergeant, scratching his head with his unoccupied hand. "They must have got a couple of sackfuls away."

"But why slit them up, when they could have shouldered a couple and carried them off?"

"Can't say, sir," said the sergeant.

Lennox turned back to the doorway, and his companion followed with the light.

"Hold it lower," said Lennox, and the man obeyed, showing

the grain they had first noticed lying scattered about, while a little examination further showed the direction in which those who had carried it off had gone, leaving sign, as a tracker would call it, in the shape of a few grains which had fallen from the loads they carried.

"Follow 'em up, sir?" said the sergeant. "It would be easy enough if it keeps like this."

"Yes," said Lennox. "We should know then if it was the Boers."

The man stepped forward with the door of the lantern opened and the light held close to the ground, making the bright yellow grains stand out clearly enough as he went on, though at the end of a minute instead of being in little clusters they diminished to one here and another there, all, however, running in one direction for some fifty yards; and then the sergeant stopped.

"Seems rum, sir," he said.

"You mean that the Boers would not have been going in this direction?"

"That's so, sir. I'm beginning to think that it couldn't have been them."

"I'm glad of it," said Lennox, "for I want to feel that we can trust them. Who could it have been, then?"

"Some of the friendly natives, sir, I hope," replied the sergeant.

"But they wouldn't have come this way, sergeant. It looks more as if some of our own people had been at the corn."

"That's just what I was thinking, sir," replied the sergeant, "only I didn't want to say it."

"But that's impossible, sergeant. A man might have slit up the sacks out of spite, or from sheer mischief, but he wouldn't have carried off any."

"No, sir. He wouldn't, would he? Well, all I can say is that it's rather queer."

"Well, go on," said Lennox; and the sergeant went on, tracing the grain right out to the back of the corrugated iron huts that formed one side of the square, and then past the angle and along the next side, now losing the traces, but soon picking them up again, the hard, dry earth completely refusing to give any trace of the bearer's feet.

Then the next angle of the square was reached, turned, and the sergeant still passed on with the light.

"Gets thicker here," he whispered, and directly after he stopped and pointed down at two or three handfuls of the bright grain.

"Seem to have set down a basket here, sir," he said softly. "Shall I go on?"

"Go on? Yes, and trace the robbery home. The scoundrel who has tampered with the stores deserves the severest punishment."

The sergeant proceeded, but more slowly now, for he had only a grain here and a grain there to act as his guide; but these still pointed out the direction taken by the marauders, till the trackers came suddenly upon a good-sized patch.

"Tell you what, sir," whispered the sergeant; "there's only one chap in it, and he's got such a swag he's obliged to keep stopping to rest."

"Yes, that seems to be the case, sergeant," said Lennox, looking carefully about. "Let's see; we must be near the colonel's quarters," he whispered.

"That's right, sir. About twenty yards over yonder; and the fellows on sentry ought to have seen the light and challenged us by now."

"No," said Lennox; "the houses completely shut us off. Go on."

The light was held low down again and swung here and there in the direction that the marauder ought to have taken; but there was not a grain to be seen to indicate the track, and the sergeant had to hark back again and again without being able to find it.

"Rum thing, sir," he whispered. "He must have stopped here and found that his basket was leaking, and patched it up, for I can't see another grain anywhere."

"Neither can I, sergeant; but try again. Take a longer circle."

"Right, sir; but it does seem queer that he should have stopped to make all fast just behind the colonel's quarters."

"It seems to indicate that it was the work of some stranger; otherwise he would not have halted here."

"P'r'aps so, sir; but if he was a stranger how did he know where the corn store was?"

"Can't say, sergeant. Try away."

"Right, sir," said the man, proceeding slowly step by step, with the open lantern very close to the ground, and making a regular circle, in the hope of cutting the way at last by which the supposed thief had gone off after his last rest.

But minute succeeded minute without success, and Lennox was about to urge his companion onward in another direction, when the sergeant uttered a sharp ejaculation as if of alarm, jerking up the lantern as he started back, and in the same movement blew out the light and shut the lantern door with a loud snap.

Lennox, who was a couple of yards behind, sprang forward, unfastening the cover of his pistol-holster and catching his companion by the arm, while all around now was intensely dark.

"Enemy coming?" he whispered.

"Dunno yet, sir," panted the sergeant, whose voice sounded broken and strange. "Something awfully wrong, sir."

"Speak out, man! What do you mean?" whispered Lennox, whose heart now began to beat heavily.

"I've come upon something down here, sir."

"Ah! The thief – asleep?"

"No, sir," said the sergeant, and his fingers were heard fumbling with the fastening of the lantern.

"What are you doing, man? Why don't you speak?"

"Making sure the light's quite out, sir. Can't speak for a moment – feel choking."

"Then you hear the enemy approaching?"

"No, sir. – Ha! It's quite out! Now, sir, just you go down on one knee and feel."

"I don't understand you, sergeant," whispered Lennox; but all the same he bent down on one knee and felt about with his right hand, fully expecting to touch a heap of the stolen grain.

"No corn," he said at the end of a few seconds; "but what's this – sand?"

"Take a pinch up, and taste it, sir. I hope it is."

"Taste it?" said Lennox half-angrily.

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant out of the darkness, and the faint rustle he made and then a peculiar sound from his lips indicated that he was setting the example.

The young officer hesitated no longer, but gathering up a pinch of the dry sand from the ground, he just held it to the tip of his tongue.

"Why, sergeant," he whispered excitedly, "it's powder!"

"That's right, sir," replied the man. "Gunpowder – a train; a heavy train running right and left."

"Nonsense!"

"Truth, sir. I had the lantern close to it, and might have fired it if I'd dropped the lantern, as I nearly did."

"But what does it mean? Here, sergeant, that's what we have to see."

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant in a hoarse whisper, "and don't you grasp it? One way it goes off towards the veldt – "

"And the other way towards the colonel's quarters," whispered

Lennox. “Here, sergeant, there must be some desperate plot – a mine, perhaps, close up to that hut. Quick! Follow me.”

The sergeant did not need the order, for he was already moving in the direction of the cluster of huts, but going upon his hands and knees, leaving the lantern behind and feeling his way, guiding himself by his fingers so as to keep in touch with the coarse, sand-like powder, which went on in an easily followed line towards the back of the colonel’s hut.

It seemed long, but it was only a matter of a few seconds before they were both close up, feeling in the darkness for some trace of that which imagination had already supplied; and there it was in the darkness.

“Here’s a bag, sergeant,” whispered Lennox.

“A bag, sir? Here’s five or six, and one emptied out, and – Run, sir, for your life! Look at that!”

For there was a flash of light from somewhere behind them, and as, with a bag of powder which he had caught up in his hand, Lennox turned round, he could see what appeared to be a fiery serpent speeding at a rapid rate towards where, half-paralysed, he stood.

Chapter Nine.
Guy Fawkes Work

The light of the fired train had hardly flashed before the first sentry who saw it, fired, to be followed by one after another, till the bugles rang out, first one and then another, whose notes were still ringing when there was a muffled roar, then another, and another, till six had shaken the earth and a series of peculiar metallic clashes deafened all around.

But before the first sentry had raised his piece to his shoulder and drawn, the sergeant, seen in the brilliant light of the running train, seemed to have gone frantically mad.

"Chuck, sir, chuck!" he yelled, though Lennox needed no telling. The light which suddenly shone on the back of the cluster of sheet-iron huts had shown him what was necessary, and after raising the bag he had picked up with both hands high above his head, and hurling it as far as he could, he dashed at the others he could see packed close up against the colonel's hut, so that between him and the sergeant five had been torn from the ground and hurled in different directions outward from the buildings, leaving only the contents of a sixth and seventh bag which had been emptied in a heap connected with the long train before the others had been laid upon it in a little pile.

They were none too soon, for the last bag had hardly been

hurled away with all the strength that the young officer could command, and while the sergeant was yelling to him to run, before the hissing fiery serpent was close upon them.

Fortunately the sergeant's crawling and the following trampling of the excited pair had broken up and crushed in the regularly laid train, scattering the powder in all directions, so that the rush of the hissing fire came momentarily to an end and gave place to a sputtering and sparkling here and there, giving Lennox and the sergeant time to rush a few yards away in headlong flight. There was a terrific scorching blast, and a tremendous push sent them staggering onward in a series of bounds before they fell headlong upon their faces; while at intervals explosion after explosion followed the fiery blast, the burning fragments setting off three of the other bags, fortunately away from where the pair had fallen.

The sergeant was the first to recover himself, and raising his face a little from the ground, he shouted, "Don't move, sir! Don't move! There's two or three more to go off yet."

Lennox said something, he did not know what, for he was half-stunned, the shock having had a peculiar bewildering effect. But at the second warning from his companion he began to grasp what it meant, and lay still without speaking; but he raised his head a little, to see that beneath the great canopy of foul-smelling smoke that overhung them the earth was covered with little sputtering dots of fire, either of which, if it came in contact, was sufficient to explode any powder that might remain.

But two bags had escaped, the explosive blast rising upward; and the danger being apparently at an end, the principal actors in the catastrophe roused to find officers hurrying to meet them, and men coming forward armed with pails of water to dash and scatter here and there till every spark was extinct and the remaining powder had been thoroughly drenched.

"Much hurt, old chap?" cried Dickenson, who was the first to reach his friend, and he supplemented his question by eagerly feeling Lennox all over.

"No! No: I think not," said Lennox, "except my head, and that feels hot and scorched. Can you see anything wrong?"

"Not yet; it's so dark. Here, let's take you to the doctor."

"No, no!" cried Lennox. "Not so bad as that. But tell me – what about the officers sleeping in those huts?"

"All right, I believe; but the backs of the houses are blown in, and the fellows at home were blown right out of their beds."

"No one hurt?"

"Oh yes; some of them are a bit hurt, but only bruised. But you? Oh, hang it all! somebody bring a light. Hi, there, a lantern!"

"No, no!" roared the colonel out of the darkness. "Are you mad? Who's that asking for a light?"

"Mr Dickenson, sir."

"Bah! Keep every light away. There may be another explosion."

The colonel gave a few sharp orders respecting being on the alert for an expected attack to follow this attempt – one that

he felt to have been arranged to throw the little camp into confusion; and with all lights out, and a wide berth given to the neighbourhood of the headquarters, the troops stood ready to receive the on-coming Boers with fixed bayonets.

But an hour passed away, and the doubled outposts and those sent out to scout had nothing to report, while all remained dark and silent in the neighbourhood of the damaged huts.

Meanwhile Dickenson had hurried Lennox and the sergeant off to the doctor's quarters, where they were examined by that gentleman and his aids.

"Well, upon my word, you ought to congratulate yourself, Lennox."

"I do, sir," was the reply, made calmly enough.

"And you too, sergeant."

"Yes, sir," said the man stolidly.

"Why, my good fellow, you ought to have been blown all to pieces."

"Ought I, sir?"

"Of course you ought. It's a wonderful escape."

"Oh, I don't know, sir. What about my back hair, sir?"

"Singed off, what there was of it; and yours too, Lennox. Smart much?"

"Oh yes, horribly," said the latter.

"Oh, well, that will soon pass off. Threw yourselves down on your faces – eh?"

"No. We were knocked down."

"Good thing too," said the doctor. "Saved your eyes, and the hair about them. A wonderful escape, upon my word. Yes: you ought to have been blown to atoms. – Eh? What's that, sergeant?"

"I say we should have been, sir, if we hadn't scattered the powder-bags."

"Scattered the powder-bags?" said a voice from the door, and the colonel stepped into the circle of light spread by the doctor's lamp. "Tell me what you know about this explosion, Lennox. How came you to be there instead of visiting your posts?"

Lennox briefly explained, and the colonel stood frowning.

"I don't see all this very clearly," said the colonel. "Somebody stealing the corn, and you were tracing the thieves and came upon a train laid up to my quarters. There was a sentry there; what was he about?"

"No, sir: no sentry there," said Lennox.

"Nonsense! I gave orders for a man to be posted there, and it was done."

"I beg pardon, sir," said Lennox. "No one was there to challenge us."

"Indeed!" said the colonel. – "Who's that? Oh, Mr Dickenson, examine the place as soon as it is light. There was a man there, for I saw him myself. But now then, I cannot understand how the enemy can have stolen through the lines and carried the powder where it was found. What do you say, Lennox?"

"Nothing, sir. My head is so confused that I can hardly recall how it all happened."

“Of course. Well, you, sergeant. You said that you scattered the powder-bags.”

“Yes, sir. Threw ’em about as far as we could.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.