

Mitford Bertram

**Renshaw Fanning's Quest: A
Tale of the High
Veldt**



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Prologue

“Just consider! You would soon get to hate me. I should be the ruin of you.”

Thus the owner of the bright, sparkling face which was turned, half mockingly, half ruefully, upon that of her companion. Looking out killingly from under the broad-brimmed hat, the dark, lustrous eyes seemed to melt into his.

“How can you say such a thing?” was the reply, in the deep, half-tremulous tone of a man who is in dead earnest. “How can you say such a thing?” he repeated involuntarily, driving a spur into his horse’s flank with a dig that made that spirited animal curvet and prance beneath the restraining curb.

“Oh, take care! you are making my horse restive. And I am such a bad rider, as you know!” And the lithe, graceful figure in the well-fitting habit was thrown into the relief involved by a real physical effort. “How can I say so?” she went on; “how can I say so? Why, it is only candid on my part. Do you seriously think a butterfly like me is cut out for a life on the High Veldt?”

The man’s bronzed features faded to a ghastly paleness. He averted his head for some moments, as though with a wild instinctive idea of breaking the spell that was upon him. Overhead towered the stately cone of a great mountain, soaring aloft in the summer haze. Around, in undulating sweep, the bushclad slopes shut in the tortuous, stony road. Birds piped and called to one another in the lustrous sunlight, and the rich sensuous air was alive with the drowsy boom of bees and the metallic splash of the river in its rocky bed beneath.

“There are other and pleasanter places in this country than the High Veldt,” he said at last, but in the tone of an advocate pleading a hopeless cause, and that cause his own.

“But even then,” she rejoined, her voice softening as though in compunction over the final stab she was about to inflict, “even then – no one is less qualified to make you happy than I am, believe me. Why, you don’t really know me as I am! Sometimes I think I hardly know myself.”

“You do yourself injustice,” he said. “Give me the opportunity of proving it.”

A curious passing spasm – a kind of a stormy look – shot across the beautiful face.

“You are too generous,” she replied vehemently, “and far too good to be made miserable for life by such a little wretch as I am. Better, far, feel a little sorry now than that.”

“And you are underrating yourself. But I will not hurry you. Take time; but oh, my darling, don’t tell me that what you said just now is your final answer.”

“I must tell you that very thing. It cuts me to the heart to give you pain; and that is more than I have been able to say before to any man living. But – there are reasons – if you only knew. There. Forget that I ever said that. But I know that with you anything I may say is as safe as death itself.”

This time he made no reply. For one brief instant their eyes met, and in that instant he understood her; understood, too, that her first answer was final.

Yet he was goodly to look upon, this man, with his splendid physique, and refined, noble countenance. Many a feminine heart, we trow, would have beat quicker – but with vivid joy – at such words as he had addressed to his present companion. Many a pair of eyes would have brightened gladsomely into a quick love-light. Many another would have desired no better protector and stay until her life’s end than this man now riding by the side of her who had rejected him.

To propose on horseback is the very worst place a man can choose wherein to propose, says some one or other, by reason of both the proposer and proposee being in a measure subject to the

precarious whims of one or a pair of wholly unreliable quadrupeds. He who now rode there had either never heard that salutary axiom or had forgotten it for the occasion; but now he was made to feel its force by a male voice, some little distance ahead, hallooing —

“Now, you two good people, spur up, or we shall never get there to-night!”

And a bend in the road brought into view other horsemen – other “habits” – stationary, and obviously and provokingly awaiting the arrival of the two laggards.

And the equestrians, now merged into one group, rode on their way in the golden sunlight of that lovely afternoon, rejoicing in the exquisite glories of the wild and romantic mountain road. But, in the prevailing mirth, one among them bore no part, for he carried within his breast the dead burden of a sore and aching heart.

Chapter One. Thirst-Land

The heat was terrible.

Terrible, even for the parched, burning steppes of the High Veldt, whose baked and crumbling surface lay gasping in cracks and fissures beneath the blazing fierceness of the African sun. Terrible for the stock, enfeebled and emaciated after months of bare subsistence on such miserable wiry blades of shrivelled grass as it could manage to pick up, and on the burnt and withered Karroo bushes. Doubly terrible for those to whom the wretched animals, all skin and bone, and dying off like flies, represented nothing more nor less than the means of livelihood itself.

Far away to the sky-line on every side, far as the eye could travel, stretched the dead, weary surface of the plain. Not a tree, not a bush to break the level. On the one hand a low range of flat-topped hills floated, mirage like, in mid-air, so distant that a day's journey would hardly seem to bring you any nearer; on the other, nothing – nothing but plain and sky, nothing but the hard red earth, shimmering like a furnace in the intolerable afternoon heat; nothing but a frightful desert, wherein, apparently, no human being could live – not even the ape-like Bushman or the wild Koranna. Yet, there stands a house.

A house thoroughly in keeping with its surroundings. A low one-storied building, with a thatched roof and walls of sun-baked brick. Just a plain parallelogram; no attempt at ornamentation, no verandah, not even a *stoep*. No trace of a garden either, for in this horrible desert of drought and aridity nothing will grow. Hard by stand the square stone kraals for the stock, and a little further on, where the level of the plain sinks into a slight depression, is an artificial dam, its liquid store at present reduced to a small patch of red and turgid water lying in the middle of a surrounding margin of dry flaky mud, baked into a criss-cross pattern of cracks, like a huge mosaic.

On a low, stony *kopje*, a few hundred yards distant from this uninviting homestead, sits its owner. Nobody but a Boer could dwell in such a place, would be the first thought succeeding that of wonder that any white man could be found to inhabit it at all. But a glance would suffice to show that he now sitting there is not a member of that dogged and pachydermatous race. The face is a fine – even a noble – one, whose features the bronzed and weatherworn results of a hard life have failed to roughen. A broad, lofty brow, and pensive dark eyes stamp their owner as a man of intellect and thought, while the peculiar curve of the well-formed nostrils betokens a sensitive and self-contained nature. The lower half of the face is hidden by a dark silky beard and moustache.

One brown, sinewy hand grasps a geologist's hammer, with which it chips away listlessly at the ground. But, although the action is now purely mechanical, it is not always so, as we shall see if we use our story-teller's privilege and dip into his inner thoughts. Briefly rendered, they run in this wise:

“Oh, this awful drought! When is it going to end? Not that it much matters, either way, now, for there's hardly a sound hoof left on the place; and, even if a good rain did come, it would only finish off the whole fever-stricken lot. Well, I'll have to clear out, that's one consolation. I've held on as long as any man could, and now I'll just have to go.”

His gaze wanders over the arid plain. Far away through the shimmer it rests on a multitude of white specks – a flock of Angora goats, striving in desperation to pick up what miserable subsistence it may.

“There's nothing to be done with the place – nothing,” he muses, bringing his hammer down upon a boulder with a despairing whack. “It won't sell even for an old song – no one will so much as touch land now, nor will they for a long time to come, and there isn't a 'stone' ('Diamond' in digger parlance) on the whole farm, for I've dug and fossicked in every likely place, and unlikely one, too. No; I'll shut up shop and get away. The few miserable brutes left are not worth looking after – not

worth their *brand ziek* (Scab-affected) skins. Yet I'll have one more search, one more crazy fool's errand, after the 'Valley of the Eye,' before I trek. This 'll make the fifth – but, no matter. One may as well make an ass of oneself five times as four. I can't exactly believe old Greenway took all that trouble to dictate an infernal lie on his death-bed; and, if his yarn's true, I'm a rich man for life – if I can only find the place, that is," he adds bitterly. "And I've had four shies at it. Well, perhaps the fifth is going to be lucky."

With which consoling reflection the thinker rises from his stony resting-place, revealing as he does so a tall, straight figure, admirably proportioned. Suddenly he starts, and a sallow paleness comes over the bronzed, handsome features. For he is conscious of a strange giddiness. A mist seems to float before his eyes, shutting out completely the glare of the burning veldt.

"Never that cursed up-country fever again?" he murmurs, to himself, in real alarm.

And for the latter there is reason – reason in the abnormal and unhealthy heat of the terrible drought – reason in his utter isolation, the vast distance between himself and a fellow-countryman – let alone such considerations as medical aid.

Recovering himself with an effort, he strolls on towards the house. There is no sign of life about the place as he approaches, unless a couple of miserable, fever-stricken sheep, panting and wheezing in the shade of the kraal wall, constitute such. But, dead and tomb-like as it looks outside, there is something refreshing in the coolness of the inner room as he enters. A rough tablecloth is laid, and a knife and fork. The walls are papered with pictures from illustrated prints, and are hung with swinging shelves containing a goodly number of books of all sorts. A few chairs and a couch, the latter much the worse for wear, constitute the furniture; and, on the whole, what with pipes, stray bits of saddlery, and miscellaneous odds and ends of every description, the place is about as untidy as the average bachelor abode is apt to be within the pale of civilisation, let alone away on the High Veldt. The floor is of hardened clay, and there is no ceiling – nothing between the inmate of the room and the bare and ragged thatch, one drawback to which arrangement being that a fine, lively tarantula will occasionally drop down upon the head or shoulder of the said inmate.

A call of "Kaatje. Dinner bring," is soon productive of that meal, in so far as the remnant of a half-starved and wholly unnutritious chicken, dressed up with so insipid an ingredient as some plain boiled rice, can be said to constitute dinner. It is productive, simultaneously, of an extraordinary specimen of humanity.

A creature of mahogany hue and parchment hide, the latter hanging in flaps around her perspiring and scantily-attired person. A creature of the hideosity of one of Bunyan's fiends – a frightful grin, horn-like ears, and a woolly skull – waddling on the abnormal hip-development of the native Bushman or Koranna. A nice sort of being to bring in one's dinner, not of itself over-inviting! But one gets used to queer things on the High Veldt, and this hideous and repulsive object is only a harmless Koranna woman, and according to her lights a good old soul enough; and she officiates as cook and general factotum to this rough and ready household of one.

The swarming flies buzz around. The windows are black with them; the table is black with them; the air is thick with them. In they sail through open windows and open doors, fresh from the foetid stew-pans of the kitchen; fresh from the acrid, pungent dust of the goat kraals; fresh from the latest garbage, which they have been sharing with carrion birds, in the veldt. They light on the diner's head, crawl about his face, crowd over plates and dishes and tablecloth – mix themselves up with the food, drown themselves in the drink. Everywhere flies.

The South African house-fly is identical with the British, but he is a far greater pest. He is more aggressive, and he brings to bear upon his victims the solid weight of numbers. Go where you will, you cannot shake him off. If you fit up a waggon, and dive into the far interior, there also will the common fly be with you – and with you in swarms.

Renshaw Fanning looks disgustedly at his uninviting meal, and plays with it rather than eats. Then he pushes back his chair. He has no appetite.

Again he seeks the open air. A restless mood is upon him, and broiling, stifling as the heat is outside, he cannot remain in the house. Suddenly a winged object appears fluttering in the sunlight. A quick exclamation escapes him, as he shades his eyes to watch it.

“Ha, of course! The last straw! Locusts. Here they come, by Jove! thicker and thicker to put the finishing touch on what the drought has begun. By this time to-morrow there won't be a blade of grass left on the place, nor a hoof either.”

He stands watching the flying insects. Barely five minutes after the discovery of the first one, the air is thick with them. They seem to spring out of nowhere. Thicker and thicker they come, their gauzy wings fluttering in the sunlight, blundering into the spectator's face, colliding with the walls, falling to the ground. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. A few starved fowls at the back of the house perk up into new life as they rush forth to fill their emaciated carcasses with this unlooked-for and abundant dainty. But the watcher withdraws indoors again, as if to shut out all sight and sound of these new and fatal intruders, and, as he does so, he is conscious of terrible shooting pains in his limbs.

Though of Irish parentage on one side, Renshaw Fanning is South African born. His life, so far – and he is now thirty-five – has been a hard one. Few, indeed, are the wilder, rougher phases of South African life of which he has not had more or less experience. He has farmed and has ridden transport (Carriage of goods by waggon), he has hunted and traded in the far interior, he has been a treasure-seeker, and has also fought in the border warfare which now and then breaks out between the colonists and their savage neighbours. But profitable as some of these avocations frequently are, somehow or other Renshaw Fanning has never seemed to make a success of anything, and this is mainly owing to the extraordinary unselfishness of the man. He will divest himself of his last shilling to help a friend in need, or even a mere acquaintance – indeed, he owes the possession of his arid and uninviting desert farm to this very failing, in that he has been forced to accept it in satisfaction of a bad debt which would otherwise completely have ruined him. As a matter of course, his friends and acquaintances vote him a fool, but deep down in their hearts lies a mine of respect for the only thoroughly unselfish man they have ever known; and even the unscrupulous ones who have traded upon and profited by his failing did so with compunction.

But with all his soft-heartedness and sensitive and retiring temperament, none who knew him have ever for a moment mistaken Renshaw Fanning for a muff. No cooler brain exists, no steadier hand or keener eye in times of danger or dangerous sport – whether at a critical moment, at the mercy of some treacherously disposed barbarian tribe in the far interior, or with finger on trigger awaiting the lightning-like charge of a wounded and infuriated lion. Or on treasure-seeking enterprise, when physical obstacles combined with failure of water and scarcity of provisions to render advance or retreat a work of almost superhuman difficulty, the post of hardship and privation was that which he unobtrusively assumed; and, indeed, there are men still living who, but for this, would long since have left their bones in the desert – occupants of unknown graves. No, assuredly none who know him can ever mistake Renshaw Fanning for a muff.

Such is the man whom we see, solitary, depressed, and in breaking health, contemplating, on his desert farm, the approach of ruin – which ruin all efforts on his part are powerless to avert.

Chapter Two. A Friend in Need

Down, down to the far horizon sinks the westering sun, the malignant fierceness of his blazing countenance abating somewhat, for he is within an hour of his rest. Yet the earth still gives forth its shimmering heat, and on every side the red surface of the parched-up plain assumes a hue of blood beneath the golden glow of sunset, which, contrasted with the vivid blue of the heavens, is productive of a strangely weird and unearthly effect.

So thinks, at any rate, a horseman, toilsomely making his way over its inhospitable expanse. His steed, suffering terribly from want of water, as well as from a lack of nutritious food, can hardly drag its limbs along, and more than once has the rider endeavoured to relieve the poor beast by undertaking long spells of walking. But who can indulge in protracted exercise under such difficulties? Consequently the horseman, though of fine and powerful build, is nearly as fagged and used up as his unfortunate steed. Now and again a flying locust raps him in the face as he rides.

“What an infernal country!” he exclaims aloud, wiping his dripping forehead. “Nearly sunset, no sort of habitation in sight, and not even a drop of water in this howling desert. By Jove! the situation is getting serious,” he adds, in a tone bordering on alarm.

His alarm is not without reason. Since quitting last night's camp beside a nearly dry waterhole, containing a noisome mixture, and that of the consistency of pea-soup, he has found no trace of the indispensable fluid. And he is lost. A worn-out horse under him, foodless, waterless, in the midst of an apparently interminable desert, he has every excuse for beginning to feel excessively concerned.

He is a fine, tall, well set-up man, this stranger. No partiality could define him as handsome. His features have no regularity, and his light-blue eyes are a trifle too small and deep set; but there is a certain power about his countenance, whose square, resolute jaw the short, fair, pointed beard and heavy, sweeping moustache can only half hide. Though his face and hands are burnt red brown, there is a subtle something which tells at a glance he is not colonial born, and that, too, quite apart from the newness of his travelling dress prematurely worn by rough usage, and of the serviceable valise which is strapped in front of his saddle.

A stony *kopje*, the only eminence for five miles around, rises before the traveller. This he has been using as a landmark, and through its agency steering in a straight line. It, too, having reached, he now ascends, and immediately there escapes him a pretty forcible ejaculation of relief. Away in front, breaking the deadly monotony of this horrible plain, lies a house – a homestead.

It is still three or four miles distant, though apparently nearer. But the horse has espied it as soon as his rider, and, pricking forward his ears, he picks up his head and steps out with something of an approach to briskness.

The first elation – at the certainty of finding necessaries, such as food and drink – over, the traveller's thoughts turn to considerations of comfort. After all, the welcome haven is in all probability a mere rough Boer homestead, the abode of dirt and fleas, a place wherein comfort is an unknown quantity. And at such a prospect, hungry, thirsty, thoroughly wearied as he is, his spirits droop.

But his musings are interrupted in a sufficiently startling manner, by nothing less than the “whiz” of a bullet unpleasantly close to his head, simultaneously with the “bang” of the piece whence it was discharged.

Looking up, he finds that he has approached within a few hundred yards of the homestead. In the doorway of the same stands a tall man, clad in a shirt and trousers, with a gun in his hand, from which he is extracting the still smoking cartridge shell. Barely has he mastered these details than another bullet sings past his ear, this time nearer than the first, while the report rings out upon the evening air.

To say that the wayfarer begins to feel exceedingly uncomfortable is to express little. Here he is, a perfectly peaceable, unoffending person, about to seek the much-needed hospitality of yonder domicile, and suddenly, and without an iota of provocation, its owner proceeds to make a target of him in the most cold-blooded fashion. True, he has heard that many of the up-country Boers are a wild and lawless set, holding an Englishman in utter detestation. But this open and unprovoked "act of war" surpasses anything he may have been led to expect.

"Here, hallo! You, sir! What are you blazing away at me for?" he sings out, his tone betraying a degree of anger which prudence should have induced him to suppress.

His hand instinctively goes to the revolver slung round him in a holster under his coat. But of what use is a six-shooter against an enemy many hundred yards distant, and armed with a rifle? Therefore, it is with considerable relief that he beholds his unexpected adversary ground his piece, stare at him for a moment, then disappear indoors.

The feeling is but transitory, however, as it occurs to him that the fellow has probably gone in to get more cartridges, and that any moment he may find himself once more raked by the enemy's fire. He judges it prudent to try the effect of a parley before venturing any nearer.

"Hi! Hallo, friend!" he shouts, "just drop that target practice, will you? There isn't an ounce of harm about me. I'm nothing but a poor devil of a traveller lost in the veldt, and pretty well dead for want of a drink. D'you understand?"

Then it strikes him that if the inhospitable householder is, as he expects, a Boer, he will probably not understand.

"What *is* to be done?" exclaims the wayfarer in sheer despair. "Well, here goes. May as well be shot as starve in the veldt; and perhaps the fellow's only playing the fool – trying what I'm made of – and, if I were only within fifty, or even a hundred yards of him, the 'trying' wouldn't be all on one side."

Thus musing, he continues his advance upon the homestead, walking his horse, and whistling in an attempt to appear thoroughly unconcerned, although, in point of actual fact, he feels pretty much as the Six Hundred must have done on receipt of the historic and idiotic order. But no more leaden greetings reach him, nor does the enemy appear. All is silent as the grave as he rides up to the house.

The front door stands wide open, exactly as the shooter had left it on retiring therefrom. There is not a sound of anybody moving inside. The place might have been uninhabited. Just then the sun, which all this time has gradually been sinking, and has already touched the horizon, disappears.

Something like a chill creeps over the traveller at the sudden gloom which falls upon the tenement just as he is about to cross its threshold. Standing at the door, he raps it, somewhat impatiently, with the handle of his whip. No answer.

Cautiously, and with hand on his pistol, he enters. There is no passage; the door opens straight into the sitting-room. At the sight which meets his eyes he starts, and involuntarily falls back.

In a corner of the room stands a tall figure. Leaning with one shoulder against the wall, its eyes are fixed upon the intruder, great hollow eyes, which seem to glitter strangely, and the deathly pallor of the face is enhanced by its framing of dark hair and beard. Though otherwise motionless, both hands and lips are working slightly, but no sound escapes the latter. The wayfarer, though not by any means a man of weak nerves, is conscious of something horribly uncanny about this ghostlike figure, so silent and immovable, glowering at him in the shades of the fast-gathering twilight.

But at the same time he recognises his recent assailant. No ghost this, but – a madman.

For a moment both stand staring at each other. Then the strange-looking figure speaks.

"Welcome, friend – welcome. Come in, come in. Make yourself at home. Have you brought any locusts with you? Lots of them – swarms, to eat up what little grass the drought has left. Have you brought them, I say? Aha – fine things, locusts! Don't know how we should get on without them. Grand things for this Country! Fine country this! Green as an emerald. Emeralds, no, diamonds. But there isn't a 'stone' on the place, devil a 'stone.'"

“Locusts! Emeralds! Diamonds!” echoes the stranger in amazement. “Scott, but the poor chap’s clean off his chump – clean off it! What on earth am I to do with him, or with myself either for the matter of that?”

“Not a ‘stone’ on the place!” goes on the speaker, in a mournful tone. “I’ve fossicked high and low, and there isn’t one – not one. Ah, but – the Valley of the Eye! Come, friend. We will start at once. You shall make your fortune. Dirk! Dirk!” he shouts, passing the wondering stranger, and gaining the doorway.

A withered old Koranna, clad in a mangy sheep-skin kaross, who has just finished penning a flock of Angora goats in one of the kraals, comes running up at the summons. At sight of his master his parchment visage assumes a look of deep concern.

“*Die Baas is reegte zick!*” (“The master is properly ill.”) he says, turning to the stranger.

“I should rather think he was,” assents the latter, who, although his acquaintance with colonial Dutch is extremely limited, has no difficulty in grasping the old fellow’s meaning. “Stones, locusts, Valley of the Eye! Pho! The sooner we get him to bed the better. I say, Old man,” he breaks off persuasively, laying a hand on the shoulder of his unconscious host, “you’re not quite the thing, you know. Come along and turn in. I’ll give you a hand at getting your togs off.”

The other looks at him vacantly, and seems to comprehend. He suffers himself to be led into the inner room quite docilely, and there and then to be assisted into bed. Once there, however, the blood rushes to his face, and he begins raving horribly, though his violence finds expression in speech rather than in action.

The stranger sits at his bedside carefully watching him.

“Not mad – only fever,” he remarks to himself at the close of one of these paroxysms. “Bush fever, I suppose, and plenty of it. He’s got a pulse like a steam hammer, by Jove!”

He has. Not for nothing has that unwonted giddiness, those shooting pains in the limbs, attacked him a few hours earlier. By nightfall Renshaw Fanning is in a burning fever, raving in the throes of delirium.

Chapter Three.

Renshaw Fanning's Secret

The stranger's wants had been attended to by the old Koranna woman already described; which may be taken to mean that he had found time to snatch a hurried meal during one of the sick man's quiet intervals. Then he had returned to his post.

His inhospitable, not to say dangerous, reception stood now accounted for, and with a vivid recollection of the same he took an early opportunity of carefully hiding all the firearms he could lay hands on. Old Dirk and his wife kept coming in on tiptoe to see how their master was getting on, and, in fact, betrayed an amount of concern for his well-being hardly to be looked for in the scions of a wild and degraded race. But Renshaw Fanning was a man to command attachment, from untutored and degraded savages no less than from a dog.

The night wore on, and these humble and faithful retainers, seeing that their master was in better hands than theirs, had retired to roost. The stranger, having dragged a capacious armchair into the bedroom, sat and watched. Who could this man be, he wondered, dwelling alone in this desert place, stricken with mortal sickness, and no one to tend him save a couple of miserable specimens of a miserable race, were it not that providentially he himself, in the character of a lost and starving wayfarer, had chanced upon the scene? His gaze wandered round the room. Its white-washed walls were bare and cracked, and devoid of ornament, save for a small but massive silver crucifix hanging above the bed, and an artistically carved statuette of the Blessed Virgin on a bracket. These objects, at any rate, pointed to their owner's creed, a heritage received with his Irish descent, and the plainness, or roughness rather, of the domicile in general seemed to point to a hard and struggling existence.

The night brought with it but little respite from the broiling heat of the day. Not a breath stirred the air. Even with the house door and all the windows wide open the oppressive stuffiness of the room seemed wellnigh unbearable. Winged insects, attracted by the light, found their way in by swarms, and a huge tarantula, leaving his lair in the thatch, began to walk leisurely down the wall. With something like a shudder of disgust, the stranger picked up a slipper and shied it at the hairy monster, with the effect of making him scuttle back to the shelter of the friendly thatch as fast as his legs could carry him.

The sick man tossed restlessly from side to side, now moaning, now talking to himself. Listening intently, the watcher noted that the patient's wildly spoken thoughts seemed to run strongly in two grooves – diamond seeking, and a member of the other sex. As to the latter, his voice would assume a thrilling tenderness as he passionately and oft seemed to be abjuring somebody of the name of Violet. As to the former, he was alternately despondent and fiercely sanguine, as he alluded again and again to a certain "Valley of the Eye."

"The Valley of the Eye, by Jove!" muttered the watcher to himself. "Why, that's the very thing he began about directly I came in. Said it was going to make our fortunes. There must be something in it – and – I'll bet a guinea that thing he wears round his neck holds the secret, or the clue, to it," he added, starting up in excitement over the idea.

He went softly over to the patient. The latter's left hand was clutching a flat pouch or bag of buckskin which lay upon his chest. It was suspended from his neck by a stout lanyard of raw hide.

The watcher stood for a few minutes, his eyes glittering with a strange excitement. A temptation, which was well-nigh irresistible, had come upon him. Why should he not obtain possession of the pouch, and thus share in the secret which might lead to boundless wealth? He need not retain it long, only long enough to master its contents. He could easily return it.

Then his instincts of good seemed to get the upper hand. He was not a blackguard, he told himself, and surely to take advantage of this man's helplessness to steal his secrets would be a

blackguardly and dishonest act. But, alas and alas! When the possibility opens of acquiring wealth, a man's best instincts are sure to be heavily handicapped, and so it was here.

He took a cup of milk which stood by the bedside, and, raising the patient's head, put it to his lips. It was only goat's milk, and thin stuff at that, thanks to the parched state of the veldt; but poor Renshaw drank eagerly, then fell back quiet and composed. It seemed as though the delirium had departed.

Watching him thus for a moment the stranger left him and sought the house door. He seemed to feel an irresistible longing for the open air. But so close, so stifling was the night that, as he stood outside, he hardly realised the change into the outer air. Not a living thing was moving, not a sound was heard, save now and then the trumpet-like sneeze of a goat in the kraals. Overhead, the dark vault of heaven seemed literally to flash and grow with constellations. Shooting stars darted, rocket-like, across the zenith in numbers unknown to our colder skies; and, as he looked, a bright meteor shot athwart the velvety space, leaving a red sinuous trail. But in the dead still solitude a voice seemed to whisper to his now heated imagination, "The Valley of the Eye! The Valley of the Eye!"

Re-entering, he stole a glance at his patient. The latter was now slumbering peacefully. His hand had relaxed its convulsive grasp of the buckskin pouch, and was resting beside him. Now was the time.

The stranger bent over him; then the deft "snick" of a sharp knife. The pouch was in his hand.

For the moment he felt like a common footpad. His heart beat violently as he regained his seat near the window and the light. For some minutes he sat watching the sick man. But the latter slept on peacefully. Now for the secret!

He ripped open one side of the pouch in such wise that it could easily be sewn up again. Then came a waterproof wrapper which, being unrolled, disclosed a large sheet of parchment-like paper covered with writing.

Down this he hurriedly ran his eye prior to a more careful perusal of its contents. But even this cursory glance was enough to make his face flush and his eye glisten. His hand shook so that it could scarcely hold the paper. Here was the key to wealth illimitable.

And then a strange and startling thing happened. The paper was suddenly snatched from his grasp.

So quickly was this done, so absolutely terrifying was his abrupt and wholly unlooked-for turn in the state of affairs, that his glance was hardly quick enough to mark the paper disappearing through the open window beside which he was seated, or the black, claw-like hand which had seized it. Yet he did only just see both.

He fell back in his chair in a cold sweat. Such a thing to happen in the dead midnight, with not a soul but himself astir. Small wonder that, unnerved by the dastardly act of robbery he had just committed, his thoughts should revert straight to Satan himself. The sick man was still slumbering peacefully.

Recovering his nerve to some extent, he rushed to the door and gained the outer air. All was still as death. As his sight became used to the modified gloom of the starlight he went round to the back of the house – made the complete circuit of it. Not a living thing was astir. He went even further afield, peering here, there, and everywhere. In vain. Then, with nerve and system shaken as they had never been before in his life, he returned indoors.

For long he sat motionless, pondering over this extraordinary occurrence. The first shock of surprise, the first involuntary access of superstition past, two considerations obtruded themselves. The prospect of possible wealth had been snatched from his grasp, literally strangled at its birth, for the paper looked genuine, and was certainly lucid enough, but it required studying, and that carefully. For the rest, how should he eventually account to its owner for its disappearance? And at this thought he began to feel exceedingly uncomfortable.

Not for long, however. The bag could easily be replaced, and the chances were that its owner would take for granted the security of its contents, and not go to the trouble of opening it to ascertain.

Or he himself might be far enough away by that time, but that he was loth to abandon a fellow-countryman on a lonely sick-bed in that frightful wilderness; and we must, in justice to the man, record that this consideration was genuine and wholly untinged by his own reluctance to turn his back on the place until every effort to recover the precious document had been tried. Should, however, the worst come to the worst, and Renshaw be moved to assure himself of the safety of his secret, what could be easier than to persuade him that he had himself insisted on destroying it in his delirium?

He rose softly to hunt for a needle and some twine. Having found them he re-stitched the pouch, carefully copying the mode of stitching which had held it together before. Then he went over to the bedside to re-fasten it to the sick man's neck.

This was no easy task. Poor Renshaw began to grow restless again, as though a glimmer of inspiration across his clouded and enfeebled brain warned him that his cherished secret had been tampered with. At last, however, through the exercise of consummate patience and care, the thing was done.

With a feeling of relief the stranger once more sought the outer air.

“What a fool the man must be!” he said to himself. “From the date of that paper he must have been in possession of the clue for at least two years, and yet he hasn't turned it to account. The place should be easy to find, too; anyway, I'll lay a guinea I'd have ferreted it out long before this. Rather! Long before!”

Thus he decided, overlooking the trifling probability that if Renshaw Fanning, with lifelong experience as a hunter, treasure-seeker, and adventurer in general, had failed to hit upon the mysterious locality, it was hardly to be supposed that he, Maurice Sellon, new arrival in South Africa, who, for instance, had been unable to travel across the Karroo plains without losing himself, would fare any better.

But then an under-estimate – either habitual or occasional – of his own merits or abilities did not rank among the failings of the said Maurice Sellon.

Chapter Four. Sunningdale

A wild, deep, romantic valley, winding between lofty bush-clad hills, their summits broken into many a rugged cliff, which echoes back the muffled roar of a mountain torrent foaming and hissing through its pent-up rocky channel. A lovely valley as travelled in the morning sunshine, melodious with the piping of birds from the cool shade of tangled brake and sylvan recesses on either side. Overhead a sky of the most brilliant blue; around a fresh, clear atmosphere, revivifying as wine; for it is mountain air and the day is yet young.

At its head the valley opens out into a wide basin, where the stream winds and curves through a green fertile bottom, whose rich soil for many acres is covered with growing crops of wheat and maize. Higher up still, in vivid contrast to the darker-hued foliage around, stands forth a group of tall willows, their trailing feathery boughs – affording a nesting-place to a perfect colony of noisy and chattering finks – shading the glassy surface of a large dam. Between this and an extensive orchard, whose well-cared-for trees are groaning beneath the weight of their ripening loads – peaches and apricots, the delicate nectarine, and the luscious pear – stands the homestead.

No bare, rough-and-ready shanty of sun-baked bricks this, but a good and substantial house, rendered picturesque by its surrounding of orange trees and pomegranates; of great red cactus, glowing prismatically, now crimson, now scarlet; of many-hued geraniums; of the royal passion flower twining up the pillars of the *stoep*, spreading over the roof of the verandah itself. No dead, drear, arid thirst-land this, but a veritable garden of Eden; the murmur of running water in the air, the fruits of the earth glowing and ripening around, the sunlight glinting in a network through the foliage, and a varying chorus of gladsome bird-voices echoing around from far and near. Such is Sunningdale – Christopher Selwood's farm in the Umtirara Mountains. Nor was it inappropriately named.

Seated on the *stoep* aforesaid, under the cool shade of the verandah, are two young women – one busily engaged on a piece of needlework, the other reading, or, to be more accurate, pretending to read. Not less dissimilar in appearance are these two than in their present occupation. One tall, fair, grave; the Other of smaller build, dark, *espiègle*. One deliberate of speech and movement; the other all mirth and vivacity upon any or no provocation.

“How much longer are you going on with that eternal stitch, stitch, stitch, Marian?” cries the latter, dropping her book for the twentieth time and yawning.

She addressed smiles slightly.

“Why? What would you rather I did?” she says. “You generally say it's too hot to stroll in the morning.”

“Do I? Well, perhaps it is. But you were looking so preternaturally solemn, and so silent, that I believe you were thinking of – some one. Who was it? Come, out with it!”

“You shouldn't judge everybody from your own standpoint, Violet,” is the good-humoured reply. “Now, my private opinion is you are developing quite a fidgety vein because we only get a post here once a week.”

A close observer, watching the countenance of her thus bantered, might have thought there was a hit underlying this perfectly innocent remark, but if so it escaped the speaker, for she never looked up from her sewing.

“Ha, ha, ha! Oh, wise Marian. The post, indeed! You should see the cartload of astonishing effusions I get. I believe I will let you see them one of these days. They'd astonish you considerably, if only as evidence of what a lot of idiots there are among men. No; your sagacity is at fault. You haven't hit the right nail this time.”

“Don’t you get rather tired of that kind of fun?” said Marian, biting off the end of her thread. “I should have thought there was a great deal of sameness in it.”

“Sameness! So there is. But what is one to do? I can’t help it. I don’t ask them to come swarming round me. They do it. I see a man for the first time to-day, forget his very existence to-morrow, and the day after that he tells me he can’t live without me. It isn’t my fault. Now, is it?”

“Since you ask me, I tell you I firmly believe it is. You’re a hard-hearted little – wretch, and one of these days you’ll find your own wings singed – mark my words.”

“A truce to your platitudes,” laughed the other. “I’ve heard that said so often – and – sometimes I almost wish it would come true. It would be such a novel sensation.”

By the above it will be manifest to the reader that the enunciator of these sentiments could be nothing less than an arrant flirt; as, indeed, was the case. Violet Avory was as proud of her conquests, and the multifold trophies of a substantial nature which accompanied them, as a Cheyenne war-chief of his scalps, and she looked upon them in the same light – legitimate tributes to her own prowess. She had begun to flirt when she was fourteen, and had carried it on, seriously and without a break, up to date, and she was now twenty-two. And Nature had endowed her with bountiful facilities in that line. Her face conformed to the strictest canons of beauty – oval, high-bred, with regular and delicate features, melting dark eyes, and a winsome little mouth with a smile ever hovering around its corners; and her quick, vivacious manner was forcibly if unconventionally defined by a large section of her admirers, especially the younger ones, as “awfully fetching.” She was a sort of distant connection of the Selwoods, whose acquaintance she had made during their last visit to England. They had been immensely taken with her, and now she was fulfilling a long-standing invitation to visit them in their South African home.

But with all her dazzling beauty and winning arts some men would not have looked twice at Violet Avory when Marian Selwood was by. The fair sweet face of the latter, with its large sleepy eyes, its red, smiling lips, parting from a row of white regular teeth, could grow very lovely; indeed, it was one of those faces which gain upon the observer with its owner’s further acquaintance. Nor was its normal gravity other than on the surface, for to cause the great blue eyes to sparkle with fun and mischief was no difficult matter. And Marian’s disposition was as sweet as her face, her mind that of a refined gentlewoman. She was born in the colony, and had lived the greater part of her life where we now see her, helping to keep house for her brother and his wife.

“Hot or cool, I vote we stroll somewhere,” cried Violet, starting up from her chair with a restlessness and energy she seldom displayed at that time of the day, when the sun made himself very definitely felt, even at that elevation.

“Very well,” acquiesced the other, gathering up her work. Then she added, with a smile, “You had better get a sunshade, Violet, or you’ll be taking back quite a stock of freckles. The now disconsolate ones will all cry off then.”

“Will they! But – are you not going to take one?”

“No. I’m about burnt enough already. Besides, there are no disconsolate ones in my case to doom to disillusion, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh yes! Very likely! I’m sure to believe that.”

“Go away, and get your hat on,” interrupted Marian.

“Come now, Marian,” said Violet, as the two girls wandered down the shady walk under the fruit-trees. “It’s all very well for you to affect the solemn, and all that kind of thing; but I don’t believe in it a bit, let me tell you. No – not one bit.”

“Oh, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. I believe, for all that quiet way of yours, you are just as dangerous as they pretend I am. You’re deep; that’s what you are. Now, there’s that nice Mr Fanning. You flirted with him shockingly. You know you did!”

“I wasn’t aware of it,” was the calm response. And then came a pause. It was finally broken by Marian.

“Poor Renshaw! He and I were – well, not exactly children together, for he is about a dozen years my senior, but we have known each other all our lives. And, by the way, Violet, I hope you have not been intentionally adding him to the list of your captives; but I am tolerably certain he has fallen a victim. Whether it is your doing, or pure accident, I don’t undertake to guess. But he is not the sort of man you ought to make a fool of.”

Violet laughed – mockingly, maliciously.

“Why, Marian, you’re jealous. I’ve struck the right chord at last. Never mind; it isn’t too late now. I won’t stand in your light, I promise you.”

Most women under the circumstances would have fired up – repelled the insinuation angrily. But Marian Selwood was not of that sort.

“Poor Renshaw is quite unlucky enough, without having a – well – damaged heart thrown into the scale,” she went on. “His life is hard enough in all conscience, and is just now a well-nigh hopeless struggle, I don’t mind telling you in confidence. I dare say you think there isn’t much in him because he is reserved; but more than once his cool courage has been the means of saving not one life, but many. I have heard men say, not once, not yet twice, that in any undertaking involving peril or enterprise there is no man they would rather have at their side than Renshaw Fanning. And he is the most unselfish of men. His is a splendid character, and one not often met with in these days.”

“Well done! Well done, Marian!” cried Violet, mischievously. “The secret is out at last. I know where Mr Fanning’s trumpeter lives. But, joking apart, he is awfully nice, only a trifle too solemn, you know, like yourself; in fact, you would suit each other admirably. There now, don’t get huffy. I assure you I quite missed him for ever so long after he left. How long is it since he left?”

“Just over five weeks.”

“As long as that, is it? Well, I wish he’d come again; there, is that an adequate tribute to your Bayard? But I suppose he won’t be able to come all that distance again – hundreds of miles, isn’t it? – for ever so long – and then I shall be gone – Oh! Look there! Look, Marian, look!” she broke off, her voice rising to a scream, as she pointed, terror-stricken, to an object rising out of the grass some twenty yards distant.

Chapter Five. A Suspicious Trek

Marian, startled by the terrified shriek of her companion, followed the latter's gaze, and the object that met her own produced a qualm of repulsion mingled with involuntary alarm.

They had reached a secluded corner of the garden where the sunshine fell in a network of light through the overshadowing foliage of a group of tall fig-trees, which cast quite a semi-gloom in contrast to the glare without. On one side was a thick pomegranate hedge. The cause of Violet's terror became unpleasantly manifest in the shape of a hideous black head rearing itself up from the ground. It was followed by the gliding sinuous body of a huge snake.

Shriek after shriek arose from Violet's lips.

"It's coming straight at us!" she screamed, and mastering an impulse to faint, she turned and fled from the spot as hard as she could run.

It certainly was coming straight at them, and that with a velocity and determination abnormal to its kind. Another peculiarity was that it came on in a straight, smooth glide, without a writhe, without even a wrathful hiss. In fact, the reptile's behaviour, to anybody but a brace of badly frightened women, was singular to a degree.

"It's only a rinkhaals," cried Marian, bravely standing her ground. "Lend me your Sunshade, Violet."

But the latter was already a hundred yards off, where, half ashamed of her panic, half secure in the distance she had covered, she turned to see what would happen. Suddenly a sound of suppressed laughter reached Marian's ears. It seemed to come from the pomegranate hedge. Simultaneously the snake came to an abrupt standstill, and lay motionless.

Any misgivings Marian may have felt vanished on the instant. She knew that laugh, and recognising it became alive to something which in her not unnatural alarm had escaped her before. The snake was as dead as a pickled herring, and there was a noose of thin twine round its neck.

"Chris! How can you?" she cried. "You have nearly frightened Violet to death!"

"Have I?" laughed Christopher Selwood, emerging from his hiding-place. "No, no! That won't do. Why, wasn't it Miss Avory who was sticking out the other day that no snake in this country could scare her? Ho, ho, ho!"

The speaker was a well-built, good-looking man of middle age, with a heavy brown beard, just beginning to show a streak of grey here and there, and keen, fun-loving eyes. His face was tanned and burnt, likewise his hands, which latter were rough and horny through much hard manual labour. He was dressed in cord trousers and a flannel shirt, and carried his jacket under his arm.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared again! picking up the dead snake by its late motive power – the twine to wit. "Where's the young lady who isn't afraid of snakes?"

"Really, Chris, what a great schoolboy you are!" said his sister. "If I were Violet, I should never forgive you. You had no business to frighten her like that!"

"No, you hadn't," said Violet, who now came up. "But I'll forgive you, Mr Selwood, because – I'll be even with you yet."

"Hallo! That's a rum sort of forgiveness. Well, Miss Avory, I won't grumble; you shall work your wicked will, how, when, and where you please."

"Ugh! What a hideous thing!" said Violet, contemplating the dead reptile with a shudder, "But – joking apart – they can't be very plentiful, can they? Ever since I've been here I've only seen one, and it was dead."

“There’s a proverb here, Miss Avory,” said Selwood, with a twinkle in his eye, “that if you come across one snake, you are dead certain to run against at least two more in the course of the day. So be careful.”

“Nonsense, Violet. Don’t believe a word of it,” said Marian. “Chris, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Where did you get that rinkhaals from?”

“This end wall of the land. He was coiled up, basking in the sun. Saw him before he saw me – slunk round t’other side of the wall, and dropped a stone bang on the top of him. Like to have the skin to hang up in your bedroom, Miss Avory?”

“Ugh! No, I wouldn’t. But wait a bit, Mr Selwood. You’ll live to wish you hadn’t played me this trick yet,” retorted Violet, mischievously.

Selwood laughed again.

“Hallo! What’s all this?” he exclaimed, as the lowing of cattle, mingled with the bleating of sheep and goats, together with a considerable cloud of pungent dust, announced the arrival of a trek of some sort.

They had reached the garden-gate and emerged close to the group of huts forming the quarters of the native farm servants. Before and around these were about twenty head of cattle, old and young, and quite a considerable number of sheep and goats, upon all of which Selwood’s experienced eye fell with no approving gaze.

Two Kafirs, arrayed in red blankets and tattered trousers, stepped forward.

“*Ndaag, Baas—’ndaag, missis!*” (Abbreviation of “Good day”) began one of the two, a tall, unprepossessing looking fellow, with one eye and pock-marked countenance; and speaking in Boer Dutch, he asked leave to rest his stock for a few hours.

Selwood ran his eye down the greasy, red-clay-smearred document (Kafirs travelling within the Cape Colony are compelled by law to provide themselves with passes), which set forth that Muntiwa and Booï – Hlambi Kafirs – were authorised to remove so many head of cattle and so many sheep and goats to Siwani’s location in Kaffraria, travelling by such and such a road. It went on to enumerate particulars of the stock, the various earmarks, and sundry other details, and seemed perfectly in order. A glance or two having sufficed to effect a comparison between the said particulars and the animals themselves, Selwood replied —

“I can’t let you stop here, Muntiwa. Your sheep are the most infernally scabby lot I ever saw in my life, and I don’t half like the look of your cattle. See there,” he went on, pointing to a particularly dejected-looking cow, whose miserable aspect and filmy eye denoted anything but rude health; “that looks uncommonly like a case of red-water. So you must trek on. I can’t have my stock infected.”

“*Whau! Siya qoka!*” (“Ah, you lie!”) cried the Kafir, savagely, advancing within a couple of yards of Selwood, his kerries shaking in his grasp with his suppressed rage. “There is nothing the matter with the cattle, and you know it. We shall rest here whether you like it or not.”

Things began to look pretty serious. Christopher Selwood was as good a man as most men of his age and training. But the Kafir, too, was of powerful build, and was evidently a turbulent, quarrelsome fellow; and an ugly customer all round. Moreover, he had a mate, rendering the odds two to one. Then Selwood was handicapped by the two girls, but for whose presence he would instantly have knocked the insolent native down. Yet for all these disadvantages he was not the sort of man to stand any nonsense; least of all from a native.

“Go indoors. I’ll be with you in a minute,” he said to the girls, by way of clearing the decks for action.

Violet, looking alarmed, made a step to obey. But Marian did not stir, and there was a dangerous gleam in her blue eyes. It was possible that in the event of a collision the Kafirs might not have found the odds so overwhelmingly in their favour as they expected.

“Look here,” he went on: “if there’s any more *indaba* you’ll find yourself in the *tronk* to-night at Fort Lamport. Do you imagine for a moment I’m going to be bossed by a couple of Kafirs, and on my own place, too? You must be mad! Now, trek at once!”

The spokesman of the two, stung by the other’s calmness, came closer, shaking his kerries unpleasantly near Selwood’s nose. But the latter never moved.

The other native said something in a low, quick, warning tone. It was effective. Both Kafirs turned, and, walking away, began collecting their stock, aided by their women and children, who, laden with mats and cooking-pots, and other household gear, had, up till now, been squatting in the background.

“Hey, *umlúngu!*” (White man) cried the one-eyed savage, turning to fire a parting shot, “we shall meet one of these days. Take care of yourself!” he added, with significant irony.

“Ha! ha! So we shall, my friend. But it will be in the magistrate’s court. Bad hats both of them,” he added, turning to the girls. “Queer that they should own all that stock. But the pass was all right. Yet there are such things as forged passes. By Jove! I’ve a good mind to send over and warn the Mounted Police. Not worth the trouble, though. I’ll just ride down after dinner and make sure that they are clear off the place. Impudent dog, that wall-eyed chap. If you two hadn’t been there I’d have given him the best hammering he ever had in his life, or he’d have given me one.”

With which remark the speaker characteristically dismissed the affair from his mind altogether.

“I’ve had a letter from Renshaw,” said Mrs Selwood, as they sat down to dinner.

“A letter!” cried Violet, suddenly interested. “Why, it isn’t post-day! How did you get it?”

“Theunis Bezuidenhout brought it out from Fort Lamport. He says the drought up there is something fearful – ”

“Who? Theunis Bezuidenhout?” struck in Christopher.

” – Something fearful,” went on his wife, clean ignoring this flippant remark. “There isn’t a blade of grass left on the place, and hardly a drop of water. All the sheep and goats have died except about five hundred.”

“Poor chap!” said Selwood. “What an unlucky dog he is! He’d better have cleared out of that dried-up Bushmanland place long ago, even if he had to give it away for a song. Well, he’ll have to now, anyhow. Write and ask him to come down here when he does, Hilda. He might hit on something about here to suit him.”

“Oh yes, mamma – do!” exclaimed Effie, aged twelve, with whom Renshaw was a prime favourite.

“But that isn’t all,” continued Mrs Selwood. “The poor fellow has been ill – fearfully ill – believes he would have died, but for a stranger who turned up quite unexpectedly, but just in the nick of time, and nursed him through it. It was a return of his old fever.”

“By Jove!” said Christopher, “that up-country fever is the very mischief once you get it on you. But, Hilda, write and tell him to come down here sharp – whether he leaves his few goats or not. They’re bound to die anyhow. This air will set him up on his legs again in no time – and meanwhile he can be looking around. Tell him to bring his friend too. By the way, what’s the other man’s name?”

“He doesn’t say – only that he’s a man from England. I’ll write this very evening,” she answered.

Violet Ivory’s prettily expressed concern was but the foreground to an instinctive inward conjecture as to what the stranger would be like. Poor Renshaw’s illness was not an event to move her much, and poor Renshaw himself faded into background beside the possibilities opening out before her in the advent of a stranger – a stranger from England too. Truth to tell, she was becoming a trifle bored. The incense of male adoration, as essential to her as the very breath of life, had not floated much in her direction of late; for the Umtirara range, though scenically and climatically a comparative Eden, was yet to all purposes, as far as she was concerned, an Adamless one. A stranger – lately from England! There was something delightfully exciting in the potentialities here opening out.

“Tell him he must come, Hilda!” said Marian, with, for her, a strange eagerness. “Poor – poor Renshaw! He’ll never shake off that horrible fever up there in such an awful drought-stricken desert. Tell him he must come, and come at once!”

And yet of these two it was for her who was moved to excitement over the possible arrival of a stranger, that the absent man would have given his very life – blindly, as with regard to the treasure for which he had been so blindly and so often seeking – hitherto in vain.

Chapter Six. Relapse

The sun was at least four hours high when the stranger awoke.

His night of watching coming upon the exhaustion and fatigue of his long and arduous journey of the previous day had gradually overpowered him, and towards dawn he had sunk into a series of dozes, troubled and uneasy; for the events of the night kept chasing each other in wild medley through his slumbers, assuming every form of weird and exaggerated monstrosity, till at last he had subsided into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

Now, however, he awoke with a start. The sick man's eyes were wide open, and were fixed upon him with an inquiring and puzzled expression. He felt horribly guilty beneath their searching gaze – horribly mean – in fact, he felt himself to be something next door to a thief.

Facts can assume a very cold and impartial aspect when they confront us at our waking hour. Maurice Sellon felt strongly akin to a thief.

He had stolen his host's secret – nay, more – he had robbed him of actual property. And it was beyond his power to make restitution, for he himself had been arbitrarily deprived of such power; and at the recollection of that ghostly, mysterious claw snatching the document from him in the dead midnight, he shuddered inwardly. The whole business smacked of witchcraft, and something abominably uncanny. He could not account for it, any more than he could account for the fact that he, Maurice Sellon, had crept on tiptoe to the bedside of the man who lay at his mercy – ill and helpless – and had there and then robbed him like a common thief.

All this time the two had been staring at each other, one from his sick-bed, the other from his armchair. Sellon was the first to break the silence.

“Well, old chap, how do you feel now?” he said, striving to throw into his tone a bluff heartiness he was far from feeling. “Had a bad night of it, I'm afraid?”

“Yes, I have rather,” said Renshaw, slowly. “But – when did you come? Have they looked after your horse?” And with the instinctive hospitality characteristic of his class, he made a move as though to rise and personally look to the supplying of the stranger's wants.

“Don't move. Don't think of moving, I beg!” cried the latter, putting out his hand as if to arrest the attempt. “The fact is, I arrived last evening, and found you – er – well, not quite the thing; so I just thought I'd sit here in case you might want anything during the night.”

“How very good of you! I must have had a touch of my old enemy – up-country fever. I picked it up years ago in the Lembombo Mountains, through staying on there too late at the end of a winter hunting trip, and the worse of that sort of infernal business is that you are always liable to a return of it. Yes, I remember now. I did feel most uncommonly queer yesterday. And then you arrived and took care of me? It is more than probable you have saved my life, for I need hardly tell you that to be taken ill in a place like this is apt to turn out no joke.”

“Well, you were in a baddish way, certainly,” interrupted the other, rather hurriedly. “And now, look here. I'm not much of a doctor, but I seem to have a pretty strong notion that when a fellow's feverish the best thing he can do is to keep as quiet as possible. Which, done into plain English, means that you've talked quite enough, and you'd better turn over and try to go to sleep again.”

“I believe you're right,” said Renshaw, for he was beginning to feel bad again. “But first of all oblige me by going to the door and shouting ‘Dirk!’”

Sellon complied, and, in obedience to the call, the old goatherd came trotting up. A grin of satisfaction puckered up his parchment visage as he saw his master so much better and able to talk rationally again.

“Dirk,” said the latter, when the Koranna’s cheery congratulations were exhausted, “you keep the goats near, round the house to-day, so as to be within call – it wouldn’t make much difference if they stayed in the kraal for all the poor brutes find to eat in the veldt – however, I suppose they find something. What have you done with the stranger Baas’ horse?”

“He’s in the stable, Baas.”

“All right. See that he’s well fed – luckily we have plenty of mealies. And there are a few bundles of oat-hay left. Let him have them, Dirk.”

“Ja, Baas. That shall be done.”

“And tell Kaatje to see that the stranger Baas has everything he wants – as far as the resources of the establishment will permit,” added Renshaw in English, turning to his guest with a rueful smile. “I’ve been telling old Dirk to see that you have everything you want, so be sure you keep him up to the mark, and see that you get it. He can grind out a few words of English, and his wife a few more, so you’ll be able to make them understand. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll lie quiet a little, for I’m feeling most confoundedly played out.”

“My dear fellow – certainly, certainly. I think you’ve been talking far too much already,” answered Sellon, effusively. “It’s awfully good of you to think about me, but don’t bother yourself on my account.”

His unfamiliarity with the Boer dialect – the habitual medium of speech between Cape colonists and natives – had left him necessarily ignorant of his host’s solicitude on his behalf, as conveyed in the foregoing instructions. Renshaw Fanning, lying there miserably ill, had no thought – uttered no word – on behalf of his own interests during those directions to his servant. All his anxiety was for the comfort and well-being of the stranger within his gates. It was only a part of that unselfishness which was characteristic of the man – which had become, in fact, second nature.

Presently he turned again to Sellon.

“I beg a thousand pardons,” he said. “How very thoughtless of me, but it never seems to have occurred to me all this time that you may have business of your own to attend to. If that is the case, even at the risk of appearing inhospitable, I beg you will not delay your journey here on my account. I shall be on my legs again in a day or two – one thing about this complaint, its attacks though sharp are frequently short – and apart from necessity it must be very tedious for you to feel yourself tied down in a rough and comfortless place such as this.”

“My dear fellow, don’t you bother yourself about me,” replied the other, decisively. “I’m going to see you through it before I move on. When a fellow’s ill in an out-of-the-way hole like this he wants a ‘man and a brother’ about him; and I’m going to stick to you like a leech until you’re yourself again. So don’t jaw any more, there’s a good chap, but just snooze off right away.”

In announcing this resolution the speaker was fully alive to what he had undertaken. It was the outcome of no mere passing impulse of generosity. And really, to make up one’s mind deliberately to dwell for an indefinite period in a very rough and uncomfortable tenement, in the midst of a burnt-up starving wilderness, destitute not only of the ordinary comforts of life, but almost of anything fit to eat or drink – this, too, alone with a perfect stranger in for a possibly long bout of severe fever – is something of an act of self-sacrifice, which we hope, virtuous reader, you will remember to set off against the man’s other failings and derelictions.

If circumstances had rendered Maurice Sellon a bit of a scamp – if a further combination of the same might conceivably render him a still greater one – yet he was, according to the definition of those who knew him, “not half a bad fellow in the main.” His resolution to see his newly found acquaintance through what would certainly prove a tedious if not a dangerous illness, was purely a generous one, dashed by no selfish motive. A subsequent idea, which flashed upon him like an inspiration, that even if the precious document relating to the mysterious treasure were lost beyond recovery, his newly made friend was almost sure to know its contents by heart, and might be brought to share the knowledge with him, was entirely an afterthought, and this we desire to emphasise. To

slightly tamper with the proverb, “*Want of money is the root of all evil,*” and Maurice Sellon, in common with many worthier persons, stood sorely and habitually in need of that essential article.

But scamp or no scamp, his presence there was a very fortunate thing for his fever-stricken host. By nightfall poor Renshaw had a relapse; and for three days he lay, alternatively shivering and burning – intermittently raving withal in all the horrors of acute delirium. Then the presence of a strong, cheery, resourceful fellow-countryman was almost as that of a very angel of succour; and even then nothing but a fine constitution, hardened by a life of activity and abstemiousness, availed to snatch the patient from the jaws of Death himself.

Chapter Seven. “Our Object is the Same.”

“Do you know, Fanning, you gave me the very warmest reception here I ever met with in my life?” said Sellon, one day, when his patient was fairly convalescent and able to talk freely.

Renshaw looked puzzled.

“It’s very good of you to say so,” he answered. “You know by this time what the resources of the place are – or, rather, are not. Still, you were warmly welcome, and – I can never thank you enough, Sellon, for the unselfish way in which you have stayed here doing the good Samaritan for a perfect stranger, I owe my life to you.”

The other burst into a shout of laughter.

“That’s not what I meant, old chap. Stop. I’ll explain. But, first of all, where are your guns?”

Surprised at the question, Renshaw opened the Chest where the firearms were usually kept. It was empty.

“Now, look behind that big box under the sofa,” said the other, with a laugh.

This was done, and lo! there were the missing weapons, carefully rolled in sacking. Choking with laughter over the recollection, Sellon proceeded to narrate the circumstances under which he had been made a target of, as we have seen.

“And I’ll tell you what it is, old man,” he concluded; “if you can make such good shooting at five hundred yards when you’re off your chump, it’s sorry I’d be to do target for you at six hundred when you’re not.”

Renshaw whistled, and shook his head.

“I must have been bad,” he said. “Well, you saw how bad I was. But, I say, Sellon, did I – er – talk much – talk bosh, you know? Fellows often do when they’re that way.”

“Well, the fact is, you did, rather, You seemed to wander a good deal – talked a lot about ‘stones,’ and a certain ‘Valley of the Eye,’ which was going to make all out fortunes.”

Renshaw started.

“Did I?” he said, passing his hand over his eyes, as if to clear his recollection. Then he was silent for a while, and seemed to be thinking deeply. The other, though affecting the greatest unconcern, watched him narrowly.

“Look here, Sellon,” he went on, “it isn’t in the least odd that I should have talked about that. I firmly believe in the existence of the place, though I’ve made no less than four careful attempts at finding it. It’s not so very far from here, I believe, and sooner or later I shall hit upon it.”

“Well, and what then?”

“What then?” repeated Renshaw, slowly. “Only that we are something near millionaires.”

But for the fact that his own eyes had rested on the clue to the mystery, Sellon would have suspected that his friend’s mind was wandering still, that from long dwelling upon this one idea it was following a chimera with all the blind faith which accompanies a self-wrought delusion. Now, however, as he listened, there was an intensity of eagerness in his face, which, try as he would, he could hardly suppress.

“We?” he said. “Do you want me to help you to hunt for this Golconda, then, old chap?”

“I do. You have saved my life, Sellon, and you may possibly find that it was the best day’s work you ever did in yours. You shall share the knowledge that will make rich men of us. We will search for the ‘Valley’ together.”

“I’m your man, Fanning. That sort of thing will suit me down to the ground. Now, look sharp and get strong on your pins again, and we’ll start.”

The other smiled.

“What a mercurial fellow you are, Sellon! No; that isn't how to go to work. How, I ask you, are we going to set out expedition on foot, now? Look at that, for instance,” – pointing through the open door to the bare veldt. Shimmering in the fiery forenoon, “And it's worse country over there than here. We must wait until the drought breaks up.”

“Must we? And, meanwhile, somebody else may hit upon the place.”

“Make your mind easy on that point. But for the clue I possess, it would never be found – never. Didn't I tell you I had searched for it four times, and even with the key hadn't managed to find it, and I've spent my life on the veldt, knocking about the Country on and off? But this time I believe I shall find it.”

“Do you? Now, why?”

“Look around. Whether the drought lasts or not, I'm practically a ruined man. Now it is time my luck turned. This will be, I repeat, the fifth search, and five is a lucky number. Like many fellows who have led a wandering and solitary life, I am a trifle superstitious in some things. This time we shall be successful.”

“Well, you seem to take the thing mighty coolly,” said Sellon, refilling his pipe. “I should be for starting at once. But what do you propose doing meanwhile?”

“Take my word for it, it's a mistake to rush a thing of this sort,” answered Renshaw. “It'll bear any amount of thinking out – the more the better.”

“Well, but you seem to have given it its full share of the last, anyhow. There's one thing, though, that you haven't mentioned all this time. If it is a fair question, how the deuce did you come to know of the existence of the place?”

“From the only man who has ever seen it. The only white man, that is.”

“Oh! But – he may have been lying.”

“A man doesn't tell lies on his death-bed,” replied Renshaw. “My informant turned up here one night in a bad way. He was mortally wounded by a couple of Bushman arrows, which, I suppose you know, are steeped in the most deadly and virulent poison. The mystery is how he had managed to travel so far with it in his system, and the only explanation I can find is that the poison was stale, and therefore less operative. He died barely an hour after he got here, but not before he had left me the secret, with all necessary particulars. He had discovered it by chance, and had made three expeditions to the place, but had been obliged to give it up. There was a clan of Bushmen living in the krantzes there who seemed to watch the place as though it contained something sacred. They attacked him each time, the third with fatal effect, as I told you.”

“By Jove!” cried Sellon, ruefully, his treasure-seeking ardour considerably damped by the probability of having to run the gauntlet of a flight of poisoned arrows. “And did they ever attack you?”

“Once only – the attempt before last I made,” replied the other, tranquilly. “That made me think I was nearer hitting upon it than I had ever been.”

“By Jove!” cried Sellon again. “That's just about enough to choke one off the whole thing. A fellow doesn't mind a fair and square fight, even against long odds. But when it comes to poisoned arrows, certain death coming at you in the shape of a dirty little bit of stick, that otherwise couldn't hurt a cat – faugh! I suppose these little devils sneak up behind, and let you have it before you so much as know they're there?”

“Generally; yes. Well, you know, every prize worth winning involves a proportionate amount of risk. And there may be some about this business, it's only fair to warn you, though, on the other hand, there may not.”

“All serene, old chap. I'll chance it.”

“Right,” said Renshaw. “Now, my plan is this. It's of no use sticking on here. I can do no good at present, or I'm afraid for some time to come. I propose that we go and look up some friends of mine who live down Kafirland way. They've a lovely place in the Umtirara Mountains – a perfect paradise

after this inferno. We'll go and have a good time – it'll set me on my legs again, and enable you to see an entirely different part of the country. Afterwards, we'll come back here, and start on our search.”

“That's not half a bad plan of yours, Fanning. But, see here! old chap. These friends of yours don't know me. Isn't it slightly calm my rolling in upon them unasked?”

“Pooh! not at all. Chris Selwood's the best fellow in the world – except, perhaps, his wife, I was going to say. We were boys together. If we were brothers, I couldn't be more at home anywhere than at his place – and any friend of mine will be as welcome as a heavy rain would have been here a month ago.”

“That's a good note, anyhow. But – to come back for a minute to the 'Valley of the Eye' – what are we going to find when we get there? You didn't happen to mention just now.”

“There are only two things to be picked up in this country – and plenty of both, if only one knew exactly where to look for them – gold and 'stones.' And we shan't find gold.”

“Diamonds! By Jove! Millionaires indeed – if we only find enough of them. Well, I don't mind telling you, Fanning, that I stand uncommonly in need of something realisable – and plenty of it. At present there exists a powerful reason for that necessity. And, I say, Fanning, I believe the same thing holds good as regards yourself.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, when fellows get a bit off their chump, they are apt to talk. Eh, you dog? Own up, now. Who is she?”

“And that's your reason for wanting to make a pile, is it, Sellon?” said Renshaw, tranquilly.

“I didn't say so,” laughed the other. “Perhaps our object is the same, for all that.”

“Perhaps it is,” was the good-humoured reply; “as you are bent on thinking so.”

Chapter Eight. Quits

The days went by, and Renshaw steadily gained in health and strength. He was now able to walk about at will, to take short rides in the early morning, and towards sundown, carefully avoiding the heat of the day, and to begin looking after his stock again. Not that the state of the latter afforded him much encouragement, poor fellow, for each day witnessed an alarming decrease in the few hundred starving animals the drought had left him. Meanwhile, the burning, brassy heavens were without a cloud, save an occasional one springing suddenly from the horizon, as though to mock at the terrible anxiety of the dwellers in this desert waste, and as suddenly melting away, together with many an eager, unspoken hope for the longed-for rain. Not a breath of air, save now and again one of those strange whirlwinds which, heaving up bits of dried stick and dust from the baked and gasping earth, and spinning them round in its gyrating course, moves in a waterspoutlike column along the plain, to vanish into empty air as suddenly as it arose – sure sign of drought, or the continuance of the same, say the stock-growers, out of the plenitude of their experience. The veldt was studded with the shrivelled, rotting carcasses of dead animals, scattered about here and there in little clumps of tens and twenties, to the advantage of clouds of great white vultures wheeling aloft ere settling down upon the plentiful repast. Even the very lizards peering forth from the cracks and crannies of the walls, or basking on the clay summit of old Kaatje's outdoor oven, seemed gasping for air, for moisture.

All this Renshaw contemplated with the recklessness of a player who has staked his last napoleon. Every day increased the unrest that was upon him, the feverish longing to get away. It was not the mere run-down feeling of one who desires a change, or the eagerness of a sensitive mind to see the last of a detested locality. There was more than this underlying it, and Maurice Sellon, watching him narrowly, though unobtrusively, noted the circumstance, shrewdly guessing, moreover, that anxiety on behalf of the mysterious Golconda was not the prevailing motive this time. But, whatever it was, Renshaw, habitually reserved, was closer than death itself.

Sellon, for his part, was as anxious to get away as his host. He was thoroughly sick of his present quarters, and of the daily occupation of seeing a few more wretched Angoras pay the debt of Nature – of staring at the glassy, shimmering horizon, and wondering when it was going to rain. Thoroughly sick, too, of swarming flies and of rough food none too appetisingly displayed – of a sofa-bed, and falling asleep to the accompaniment of the ticking rustle of the tarantulas hunting their prey in the thatch overhead, and occasionally running over his ear in the night. It was all very well for Fanning. He was used to that sort of thing – Sellon was not; therefore small wonder that he should begin to get sick of it. There wasn't even anything to shoot on the place, for the springbok had trekked in quest of more favoured regions.

Sellon, however, was blessed with a mercurial temperament, as his host had remarked, and the same now stood him in good stead, for, though bored to death, he did not wax quarrelsome – the usual development of that unenviable condition. But there was one matter which, haunting his mind day and night, bade fair even to drive him into that.

He was racked by an hourly dread lest his friend should discover the loss of the missing paper. Maurice Sellon was constitutionally as far from being a coward as the average Englishman, well endowed with thews, habitually is. But the consciousness that he had been guilty of a mean and dishonest action tended to demoralise his easy self-reliance. A man like Renshaw, the possessor of a secret of fabulous value, the clue to which he had cherished for years, and patiently; and at the cost of untold hardship and possible peril, had repeatedly attempted to solve, would, he reasoned, prove a desperate man when he should come to realise that his hopes were for ever shattered – a dangerous one, should he ever arrive at the conviction that he had been deliberately robbed. The idea

of persuading him that he had himself insisted on destroying it during his delirium seemed the only way out of the difficulty; but that expedient now struck Sellon as a particularly thin one. Such a state of mental nervousness had he reached, that he felt sure the other would at once detect it as a lie. True, he had probably saved Fanning's life, as the latter had himself declared. But at the moment of his terrible discovery that consideration was not likely to count for much.

They were alone here together. Not a living soul had they seen during all these weeks, except the family of Korannas, who officiated as servants – both field and domestic – to the establishment. They were alone together – cut off from the outside world as thoroughly as though shut up on a desert island. What deadly, terrible penalty might not Fanning exact from the man who had so deeply injured him? He was no longer weak and tottering with illness; he had, in fact, nearly recovered his normal vigour. The more Sellon looked at the situation the less he liked it.

What a fool he had been to meddle with the thing! He would have given worlds to be able to replace it. But it was gone irrevocably.

At one time his suspicions had rested on the Koranna servants. But the narrow watch he had kept upon them, as also the immediate and careful search he had made around the house at the time of the occurrence, had forced him to abandon this idea. Dismissing the Satanic theory at first formed, he had hit upon another – to a dweller in Southern Africa, almost as wild and chimerical; but then it must be remembered that Sellon was not a dweller in that country – only a “raw Englishman,” in fact, as the Boers define a recent importation. That black claw which had reft the paper from his hand in the dead midnight must have belonged to some huge baboon, who, attracted by the light, had approached the open window, and having accomplished his mischievous and monkey-like manoeuvre, had decamped forthwith to his native wilds. Anyhow, the precious clue had disappeared, and in all human probability would never again be lighted on by mortal eye.

Mingled with his apprehensions on the above counts, however, were the misgivings of cupidity, and there were times when he suspected Renshaw of regretting his offer. The latter, since first mentioning the subject of the treasure, had hardly reverted to it, and this reticence struck him (Sellon) in an unfavourable light, and the reason assigned for it as a mere excuse.

“Take my word for it,” Renshaw had said, one day, “we had better leave the subject entirely for a little longer – till we get down country, say. You see, the long and short is, it's an exciting one to me, and my head is by no means clear yet. It'll be better to put it off, and there's plenty of time.”

And this answer, judging the speaker by himself, and, indeed, it is fair to say, by his knowledge of the world, struck Sellon as eminently unsatisfactory. At the risk of a rebuff, a rupture even, he had more than once adroitly tried to “draw” his host, but with so little success as to leave him ignorant as to whether the latter was sufficiently familiar with its contents as to render him independent of the document itself.

Outwardly, the intercourse between the two men was pleasant and friendly enough, and though they had little to do but smoke Boer tobacco and wonder whether it would ever rain again, they had not yet exhausted their subjects of conversation, Sellon was a lively talker, and full of shrewd worldly wisdom, and the other's natural reserve admirably fitted him for the part of a good listener. Or, on the other hand, more than one strange wild incident, evolved out of the reticent, lonely man's own experiences, was of vivid interest to the globe-trotting *viveur*.

Then it was that the latter came to impart snatches of his own history. He had migrated to South Africa as a pure speculation, and ready for any adventure that might come to hand – mining, treasure-seeking, a trip up country, anything that promised possible profit. He had half arranged an up-country trip, and it was while journeying to a distant township to interview the other partner in the scheme that he had lost himself, and accident had landed him so opportunely at Renshaw Fanning's door.

One night they had been thus chatting, and retired to bed, having decided to make a start, at all risks, the day after the morrow. The heat was something fearful. A dead, sultry, boding stillness reigned over everything, productive of that strange nervous depression which is wont to afflict

mankind prior to an approaching convulsion of Nature. Every door and window of the house stood open, as if to keep up the fiction that there was any air to come in.

"I believe there's going to be an earthquake, at least," said Sellon, as he turned in.

"Or a big thunderstorm, only – no such luck!" answered Renshaw.

It was not the night to bear the weight of a blanket, or even of a sheet, had the latter luxury been among the resources of the establishment. Sellon, after tossing uneasily for an hour, dropped off into a heavy sleep, and dreamed.

He was alone in a deep, craggy gorge. Beetling rocks reared high above his head, just discernible in the gloom, for it was night. It was the "Valley of the Eye."

Yes; and there was the "Eye" itself – gleaming out of the darkness, seeming to transfix him with the cold stare of a basilisk. Somehow he felt no exaltation on having gained the place – no triumph over treasure trove. Instead of putting forth his efforts to reach the shining stone, his chief desire was to flee from the spot. But he could not – he was rooted to the ground, shivering, trembling, with a chill shrinking of mortal dread. Nearer, nearer, drew that gleaming Eye, and, lo! beside it flashed forth another. There were two – a pair of eyes. Then before them came shadowy hands holding a bow. It was drawn. It was pointed full at him. Still he could not move. The poisoned arrows. Oh, Heaven!

The string twanged. With a shrill hiss the arrow sped – the poisoned arrow. A loud hiss, a deafening hiss, and, lo! the gloom of the valley was lighted up with a blinding glare, and —

"Close shave that, old chap!" said a voice.

The spell was broken – broken by that well-known voice. Starting up in his bed, bathed in the sweat of deadly horror, Sellon beheld a strange sight.

The room *was* lighted up with a blinding glare. In the middle of it stood Renshaw Fanning, holding up a huge snake by the tail. The reptile was quite dead, its head shattered by the hard oaken table, but its hideous length was still undulating with a convulsive writhe. The glare was the result of a continuous succession of vivid lightning flashes. Just then a mighty rolling peal of thunder shook the house, making the doors and windows rattle like castanets. Then followed pitch darkness.

"Strike a light, if you have any handy, but don't come too near me in the dark," said Renshaw. "This joker's fangs may still be of some account, albeit he's stone dead."

As though still dreaming, Sellon obeyed.

"What the very deuce is the meaning of it all?" he said, as by the light of the candle he sat surveying the situation.

"Only this – that you were as near passing on your checks as you ever will be," was the reply, "And you may thank this thunderstorm for it that you didn't. The thunder awoke me at once, though it didn't you, and of course I went outside to look at the weather. Then, by the glare of a flash of lightning, I spotted this brute. He was lying bang across both your legs, with his head against the wall. The flash lasted just long enough for me to lay hold of his tail, and I knew the geography of the room well enough to whirl him up and bring his head down upon the hardest part of the table."

Sellon stared at the speaker, then at the hideous, writhing body of the reptile, without a word. He seemed stupefied.

"Scott!" he burst forth at last. "Well, we are quits now, at any rate. But that's something like a nightmare."

This, then, was the interpretation of his bloodcurdling dream. The terrible eyes, the frightful riveting spell, the shrill hiss, the poisoned arrow. He felt clean knocked out of time.

"Green cobra – and a big un at that," said Renshaw, throwing the carcass through the open house-door. "See how it was? The beggar knew a big rain was coming, and sneaked in here for shelter. It's never altogether safe to sleep with open doors. And now, unless you can sleep through a shower-bath, it's not much use turning in again. This old thatch will leak like a sieve after all these months of dry weather. Better have a 'nip' to steady your nerves."

The storm broke in all its fury; every steel-blue dazzling flash, in unintermittent sequence, lit up the darkness with more than the brightness of noonday, while the thunderclaps followed in that series of staccato crashes so appalling in their deafening suddenness to one belated in the open during these storms on the High Veldt. Then came a lull, followed by the onrushing roar of the welcome rain. In less than five minutes the dry and shrunken thatch was leaking like a shower-bath, even as its owner had predicted, and having covered up everything worth so protecting, the two men lit their pipes and sat down philosophically to wait for the morning.

It came. But although the storm had long since passed on the rain continued. No mere thunder-shower this, but a steady, drenching downpour from a lowering and unbroken sky; a downpour to wet a man to the skin in five minutes. The drought had at length broken up.

Too late, however. The rain, as is frequently the case under the circumstances, turned out a cold rain. Throughout that day all hands worked manfully to save the lives of the remnant of the stock – for the Angora is a frail sort of beast under adverse conditions – and as it grew bitterly cold, packing the creatures into stables, outhouses, even the Koranna huts, for warmth. In vain! The wretched animals, enfeebled by the long, terrible drought, succumbed like flies to the sudden and inclement change. Save for about two score of the hardiest among the flock, by nightfall of the following day Renshaw Fanning was left without a hoof upon the farm.

Chapter Nine. Two “Sells.”

“Heard anything of Renshaw?” said Christopher Selwood, coming in hot and tired from his work, for a cup of tea late in the afternoon.

“Not a word,” answered his wife, looking up from the last of a batch of letters that had just come in with the weekly post. “Why – you don’t think – ?” she began, alarmed at the grave look which had come over her husband’s face.

“Well, I don’t know,” he replied. “I hope there’s nothing seriously wrong. How long is it since you wrote?”

“More than a fortnight now.”

“Ah, well. I dare say it’s all right. Now I think of it, they’ve had big rains up that end of the country. Big rains mean big floods, and big floods mean all the drifts impassable. The post carts may have been delayed for days.”

“You think that’s it?” she said anxiously.

“Why, yes. At first, I own, I felt a bit of a scare. You see, the poor chap was desperately ill when he wrote – though, to be sure, he must have got over the worst even then – and I’ve been feeling a little anxious about him of late. Well, he’ll come when he can, and bring his friend with him, I hope. It’ll liven the girls up, too. Miss Avory must be getting properly tired of having no one to flirt with.”

The soft afternoon air floated in through the open windows in balmy puffs, bringing with it a scent of flowers, of delicate jessamine twined round the pillars of the *stoep*, of rich roses now bursting into full bloom. A long-waisted hornet rocketed to and fro just beneath the ceiling, knocking his apparently idiotic head against the same, and the twittering of finks darting in and out of their pendulous nests above the dam in all their habitual fussiness, mingled with the melodious whistle of spreuws holding contraband revel among the fast-ripening figs in the garden.

For a few minutes Mrs Selwood plied her sewing-machine in silence, then —

“Talking of Violet, Chris, did it never occur to you that she had flung her net over poor Renshaw?”

“Flung her net – Renshaw! No, by Jove, it never did! Why, he’s the most sober-going old chap in the world. Confound it, he must be past that sort of thing – if he ever went in for it. Why, he’s only two or three years my junior.”

“And what if he is?” was the reply of calm superiority. “He needn’t be Methuselah for all that. And then remember the hard, struggling, solitary life his has been. He’s just the man to fall over head and ears in love at middle age.”

“Pho! Not he! What matchmakers women are. Bryant and May are nothing to them. But, I say, Hilda, supposing it is as you say, why shouldn’t he go in and win, eh?”

“Do you think Violet is the sort of girl to go and end her days in a wattle-and-daub shanty away in the wilds of Bushmanland? Come now. Do you think for a moment she’s that sort?”

“N-o. Perhaps not. But there’s no reason why she should. Renshaw might find some farm to suit him somewhere else – down here, for instance. I don’t see why it shouldn’t be done. He’s a fellow who thoroughly understands things, and would get along first-rate at whatever he turned to. If he’s come into low water up there it’s more the fault of that infernal country than his own, I’ll bet fifty pounds. No, I don’t at all see why he shouldn’t go in and win, and, by Jove, he shall.”

“Who’s the matchmaker now?” retorted his wife with a smile of conscious superiority. “But there are several things to be got over. First of all, I believe he must be in very low water; in fact, pretty well at the end of his tether. That drought can’t have left him much to the good. And I am tolerably certain Violet has nothing – at least, nothing to speak of.”

“Well, that might be got over – living’s cheap enough, – and here we never get any downright bad seasons.”

“Then there’s the difference in their creeds.”

“Pho! That doesn’t count for much in these parts, where there’s precious little opportunity of running any creed in particular.”

“No, unfortunately; but there ought to be,” replied Woman, the born devotee. “But the most fatal obstacle of all you seem to overlook. It usually takes two to make a bargain.”

“What! Do you mean to say she wouldn’t have him? Well, that’s another story, of course. But Renshaw’s an uncommonly fine fellow all round – and she might do worse.”

“That I won’t attempt to deny. But I’m afraid the impression left upon my mind is that she doesn’t care twopence about him.”

“Only making a fool of him, eh?”

“I won’t say that. Violet is a girl who has been accustomed to a great deal of admiration, and has an extremely fascinating manner. It is quite possible that poor Renshaw may have walked into the trap with his eyes open.”

“Not he. He isn’t such an ass. She must have been trying to make a fool of him,” growled Selwood, with whom Violet Avory was, nevertheless, a prime favourite. “Just like you women! You’re all alike, every one of you.”

His wife vouchsafed no reply, and the whirr of the sewing machine went blithely on. Soon the silence was broken by an unmistakable snore. The slumbrous warmth of the afternoon had told upon Selwood. His head had fallen back, his pipe had slipped on to the floor. He was fast asleep.

An hour went by. It was getting nearly time to go to the kraals and count in the sheep. Still he snored steadily on. His wife, drowsy with the continual whirr of the sewing machine, felt more than half inclined to follow his example.

Suddenly there was a sound of wheels on the grassy plot outside the front garden, then a voice exclaiming in dubious tone —

“Here’s a take in. I believe they’re all away from home.”

The voice proceeded from one of the two occupants of a very travel-worn buggy standing at the gate.

“No, they’re not!” cried Mrs Selwood, to whom that voice was well known. “Come – wake up, Chris. Here is Renshaw himself!”

“Eh – what! I believe I’ve been asleep!” cried Selwood, starting up – “Renshaw – is it! Hallo, old chap. This is first-rate,” he added, rushing out. And the two men’s hands wore locked in a close grip. “Allamaghtag! But you are looking pulled down – isn’t he, Hilda? – though not quite so much as I should have expected. How are you, sir? We are delighted to see you,” he went on as Renshaw duly introduced his friend.

(“Allamaghtag!” “Almighty!” A common ejaculation among the Boers. It and similar colloquialisms are almost equally frequent among their colonial brethren.)

Then Marian appeared – her sweet face lighting up with a glow of glad welcome for which many a man might have given his right hand – and then the children, who had been amusing themselves diversely after the manner of their kind, anywhere outside and around the house, came crowding noisily and gleefully around “Uncle Renshaw,” as they had always been in the habit of calling him. To the lonely man, fresh from his rough and comfortless sick-bed, this was indeed a home-coming – a welcome to stir the heart. Yet that organ was susceptible of a dire sinking as its owner missed one face from the group, – realised in one quick, eager glance that the presence he sought was not there.

Violet’s room was at the back of the house, consequently she had heard but faintly the sounds attendant on the arrival of the visitors. She instinctively guessed at the identity of the latter, but it was clean contrary to Violet Avory’s creed to hurry herself on account of any man. So having sacrificed

a few moments of curiosity to this principle, and, needless to say, taken the indispensable look at herself in the glass, she issued leisurely forth.

Now, as she did so, Selwood was ushering in his stranger guest – was, in fact, at that moment standing back to allow the latter to enter before him. Thus they met face to face.

Then was her self-possession tried in such wise as no member of that household had yet witnessed. She halted suddenly, her face deadly white. A quick ejaculation escaped the stranger's lips.

It died as quickly, and his half-outstretched hand dropped to his side in obedience to her warning glance; for her confusion was but a momentary flash. It entirely escaped Selwood, who was walking behind his guest, the broad shoulders and fine stature of the latter acting as an opportune screen, and all the others were still outside.

“Miss Avory,” introduced honest Chris, becoming aware of her presence. “Mr – er – I really beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name just now – and Renshaw didn't happen to mention it in his letter?”

“Sellon,” supplied the other.

“By Jove! We hold half our names in common. We are both ‘Sells,’ but there we branch off – ho – ho! Sellon and Selwood, both ‘Sells,’” repeated Chris, who was fond of a joke.

An unimportant, not to say trivial remark. But like many such, it was destined in the fulness of time to be brought back pretty vividly to the memory of its originator and his hearers.

Violet acknowledged the introduction with a queenly sort of bow, and turning preceded them into the sitting-room.

“Where's Mr Fanning?” she asked, rising almost as soon as she was seated. “I must go and say ‘How do you do?’ to him.”

Sellon muttered an oath to himself as she slipped from the room, not loud enough to be heard by his host, however, who proceeded to ply him with questions as to his journey – and brandy-and-water.

Meanwhile Violet, in pursuance of her expressed intent, was greeting the other arrival with a pretty cordiality that was perfection itself, and when she tuned her voice to the requisite minor key as she asked all manner of questions and expressed all manner of sympathy with regard to his late illness, and whether he ought to have undertaken such a long journey so soon, and if he had taken *great*

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