

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

With Rifle and Bayonet: A Story of the Boer War



Frederick Brereton

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F.S. Brereton

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Chapter One. A Sad Mistake

The last few rays of a cold September sunset were streaming through the High Street of a large and populous village called Redford, in the county of Surrey, lighting up the pretty red-brick cottages and casting a deep shadow beyond the quaint and tumble-down old porch which led to the church. A few mellow shafts had slipped by it, and, struggling through the iron bars of a massive gate, travelled up a long gravel drive and cast a ruddy glow on the windows of a fine country mansion.

In one of the rooms facing the sunset, a man and a woman were standing opposite one another, engaged in angry conversation, while outside, on the great staircase, the subject of their dispute, a boy of about eleven, was slowly making his way upward, stopping now and again to let his head drop upon his folded arms against the banisters, and sob as if his heart would break. At last, after many stops, he reached a landing midway up, and was just in the act of succumbing once more to his grief when a jeering and unsympathetic laugh from above caught his ear, and caused him to give a violent start. Instantly the lad dried his eyes, and choked back his sobs. Then, with a sudden gesture, as if of determination to forget his sorrow, he crossed the landing, and with his head now held proudly erect in the air, ran up the remaining stairs and was quickly out of sight.

Meanwhile, in the room below, the man and woman faced one another in the gathering gloom, while angry words passed between them.

The former, Captain Charles Somerton by name and title, a lithe and active man of middle age, was evidently ill at ease. He stood close beside his writing-desk, shuffling restlessly from one foot to another, and toying with a paper-knife. His wife, on the other hand, was apparently calm and self-contained, though a careful scrutiny of her features would have shown that passion had almost mastered her. She was a proud, haughty-looking woman, and now that her temper had almost got the better of her there was a decidedly evil look upon her face. She listened impatiently to what her husband was saying, glaring spitefully at him, and occasionally opening her lips as if on the point of interrupting.

“My dear,” the captain was saying, somewhat nervously, “you really must be more kind to the poor little chap. Scold him if you wish to, for I have no doubt that, like all boys, he is constantly up to some kind of mischief; but if you have occasion to correct him, do so in a more gentle manner. He is quite a young lad, you must remember, and I am sure that his worst deeds cannot merit such punishment. You frighten him out of his life, and you do what I consider an extremely unkind thing – you constantly hurt his feelings, well knowing him to be a thin-skinned boy. Poor little chap! If you are not more careful he will detest you. You say that he and Frank together smashed a piece of valuable china in your boudoir? How then is it that Frank is forgiven, while Jack, who is the younger by more than a year, has his ears boxed and is spoken to so harshly?”

“There you are again, Charles!” was Mrs Somerton’s angry answer. “How often must I tell you that Jack is the ringleader in all the mischief? If it were not for him Frank would never go astray, for he is a quiet and good-mannered boy, and, unless led away by the bad example of the other, always conducts himself as I should wish.”

“I am much inclined to disagree with you there, Julia,” the captain replied, with some show of temper. “It seems to me that there is something of the hypocrite about Frank. His manners may

be good, but he can never look one in the face, and he is ready at any moment to snivel and whine. Jack may be a naughty boy, and given to getting into mischief, but I tell you candidly that I would far rather that he were so than a namby-pamby, milk-sop lad, afraid to say boo! to a goose. He's a plucky little fellow, and all that is wrong with him is that, like the majority of healthy individuals, he has a large stock of animal spirits, which are a tremendous help in getting one along in this world, but which occasionally lead one into trouble. You say he is the ringleader; but to my mind that only shows his pluck. He goes ahead where others are afraid and hang back.

“But there, my dear, do not let us quarrel about this trumpery matter. Remember that when I, a widower with one boy, married you, a widow with an only son, a great object of our union was that the lads might prove good brothers and playfellows. That was three years ago, and now we have the satisfaction of knowing that they are fairly good companions, and our wish is that they should continue so. Treat them alike, Julia, and they will always be firm friends. But make a difference between them, punish one for the other's faults, and you will surely separate the lads and cause them to dislike one another. As for the bit of china, I am sorry it is broken. Give it to me next time I go to London, and, if possible, I will replace it, or buy you something more valuable.”

Captain Somerton spoke in his kindest and most conciliatory manner, and patted his wife playfully on the arm. But this subject of the two boys was a bitter one to her, and she was far from feeling appeased.

“Yes, it is just like you, Charles, to take Jack's part!” she exclaimed, with an angry sneer. “It is always the same, and, upon my word, I have no patience with you. Jack is a mischievous little monkey, and if there is to be an unpleasant scene between us whenever he misbehaves himself, then the sooner he is sent away to school the better. If I had had my way he should have gone long ago.”

Mrs Somerton, having delivered a parting shot, glared angrily at her husband, and bounced out of the room, banging the door after her.

As for the captain, he was evidently distressed that his attempt to set matters right had failed so completely. He gave a deep sigh, and, sinking resignedly into a chair, lit a cigar, and smoked furiously till the room was filled with choking clouds, through which the red end of his cheroot glimmered feebly.

He was a soldierly-looking man, tall and upright, and with a kindly expression on his face. Had a stranger seen him he would have taken him at once for what he was. There was no mistaking the moustache and the military air; while, had anyone been in doubt, the manner in which his grooms – who were all old soldiers – saluted him, and his method of responding, would have been convincing to the dullest. A few years before the event just narrated Captain Somerton had belonged to a crack hussar regiment. But, his father dying, he had resigned his commission, in order that he might be able to manage in person the property which had come into his possession.

Then it was that his first wife had died, leaving him with a child of five. Three years later he had married a widow, who also had a boy.

It had been a sad, indeed a fatal, mistake. His second wife was unsuitable in every respect, and was the very last woman he should have selected. She had no sympathy with him, spent much of her time amongst smart people in London, and when at home invariably upset the house, and caused her husband displeasure by her treatment of his boy. Indeed, as time passed, she seemed to take a positive delight in speaking sharply to Jack, knowing well that by doing so she caused Captain Somerton pain and annoyance.

And Jack – poor little fellow! – though at first he had, boy-like, quickly forgotten his scoldings, was now really in terror of his unloving stepmother.

People who knew the Somertons, and were callers at Frampton Grange, soon learnt what kind of a woman its new mistress was. Though outwardly all that was pleasant and entertaining to them, they quickly gauged her character, and knew her to be a source of discord in a house which was, before her arrival there, one of the happiest in the land. They summed her up, noticed the icy looks

with which she often greeted Jack, and contrasted them with the tender embraces with which she almost smothered her own son.

Then they discussed the subject by other firesides till it was almost threadbare, and came to the conclusion that jealousy of Jack's undoubted superior qualities and good looks was the main cause of her unkind treatment of him.

And below stairs, in the kitchen of Frampton Grange, the captain's servants put their heads together many a time, with the result that all sympathised secretly with their master and his son, and cordially disliked the new mistress and the peevish and ill-mannered cub belonging to her.

Even as Captain Somerton and his wife were exchanging their views in the study above, old Banks, the butler, who had been with the Somertons for many years, was holding forth with unusual vehemence to the cook and maids below.

"I calls it just about a shame!" he cried indignantly, bringing his fat fist down upon the table with such a thump as to make his audience start out of their seats and cause himself a twinge of pain.

"Why can't she let the boy alone? Poor little chap! She's always a-nagging at him; and to hear her going on at the captain is enough to make yer tear yer hair. And he sits there in front of her as tame as a girl, and gives her back gentle words. Bah! I hates it! Yer wouldn't think at such times as he's got a name for miles round here as the daringest rider after hounds; but that's what he has, as anyone would tell yer. And yet, when he gets in front of her, and she starts to tackle him, he's as mild as milk, and scarcely dares to answer her. She's a vixen, that's what she is, cook, and I can tell yer I ain't much in love with her. Why don't he pitch into her a bit? But I dare say he acts all for peace! He dislikes a row, as all gentlemen does, and his motter is 'Least said the soonest mended'. 'Tain't the way I'd do it if I was in his shoes! I'd pretty soon make her leave the boy alone and stop her talk, I can assure yer!"

Banks shook his head in a threatening manner, and finding that his outburst of indignation had gained for him the sympathy and admiration of his fellow-servants, gave a deep grunt of satisfaction, and was on the point of launching forth afresh when a bell, rung from Mrs Somerton's boudoir, sounded in the passage.

With a startled "Oh, lor!" he was himself again. His flushed features at once assumed their accustomed impassiveness, and with a hasty hitch at his tie to place it in the most exact position, he slipped hurriedly from the kitchen to obey the summons.

And now to follow the boy who had been weeping so bitterly on the stairs. Having gained the landing above, he entered a large room which was evidently set aside for the lads to play in. It was carpeted with felt, almost bare of furniture, and had stacks of cricket bats and balls and other implements in its various corners. Encircling the room, and running close to the wall, was a miniature set of rails, with a wonderfully-constructed station near the fireplace; while opposite the door there was a long tunnel, built up with artificial bricks and earth, from the mouth of which a beautiful model locomotive had half emerged, and remained there stationary, waiting for steam to get up again, and hinting gently to its two old playmates that they were sadly neglectful of their one-time friend.

Here, seated on the fire-guard, with his legs dangling some inches from the floor, was a dark, sallow-complexioned lad, with heavy features and shifting eyes, who went by the name of Frank.

"Well, baby!" this pleasant young gentleman remarked as Jack entered the room, "so you've been blubbing again, have you? Why, you are always turning the taps on. We shall have a flood soon."

"If you were anything but a sneak you would take my part, and your own share in the blame," Jack answered sharply, vainly endeavouring to steady his quivering lip. "You are a coward to leave me to bear it all. Why did you say that I broke the vase, when you know very well that you pushed me against it? I may be a baby, but I'd rather be that than a coward and a sneak."

Jack blurted out his last words boldly, and glared defiantly at his stepbrother.

"Here, you shut up, baby!" cried Frank, slipping to the floor and looking threateningly at him.

"Sha'n't," said Jack stubbornly. "You know it's the truth."

“It’s the truth, is it, baby?” repeated the other, lifting his hand menacingly. “Take it back, or I’ll lick you.”

“I won’t take it back. You are a sneak and a coward, and now you are trying to be a bully,” cried Jack sturdily, facing his opponent without a sign of flinching.

“Then take that!” shouted Frank, bringing his hand with a smack across Jack’s face.

Words ended there. Jack might be a baby and give way to tears when he had been treated unkindly, for he was a very sensitive boy, though not wanting in manliness, but for all that it took a considerable amount of physical pain to make him whimper.

On the receipt of the blow from Frank his teeth closed tightly, cutting off the cry he might otherwise have given; his hands shot out in front of him, and moved rapidly backwards and forwards as he guarded the vicious blows aimed at him, while he returned them with due interest whenever there was an opportunity. To anyone who did not know the two boys it looked at first a most unfair encounter, for, despite the fact that little more than twelve months intervened between Jack’s birthday and that of Frank, the latter was at least three inches taller, and correspondingly heavy.

But, though Nature had given him a body which overlapped Jack’s by more than a year’s growth, it had placed within it a meagre stock of courage, which fact was quickly brought to light.

In the first scuffle Frank’s weight and reach gave him an advantage, and in spite of his lack of science, he planted some heavy blows on Jack’s face, which, however, only seemed to increase the latter’s stubbornness. He took his punishment without a murmur, and, blinking to clear the stars from his eyes, attacked his opponent with even more vigour and fierceness than before. Then luck favoured him. He succeeded in stopping an ugly rush with such abruptness as to make Frank stagger, and followed it up with lightning-like rapidity.

That was the turning-point. Frank could no longer face him, but dodged and scuttled round the room in a desperate hurry, vainly endeavouring to avoid the blows. One more settled the matter. With a sharp and most unpleasant thud Jack’s fist struck him on the nose, and next moment the bully was grovelling on the floor, writhing and shrieking as if in agony, while a flood of tears poured down his cheeks.

It was a funny sight, and fat and jovial old Banks, who, at his mistress’s order, had scrambled hurriedly upstairs to learn what the commotion was about, chuckled inwardly, and looked on in great enjoyment. Nor was it the only part of the struggle he had witnessed. He had arrived at the door of the play-room shortly after its commencement, quite unknown to the boys, and there he remained, listening for sounds from below, and waiting for a more opportune time to interfere.

“That’s it! Go it, my lads!” he murmured to himself, as he stood panting on the landing outside. “You’re bound to have it out, and I ain’t a-going to stop yer if I can help it. Best get it settled now. That young Master Frank’s been wanting a licking for a goodish time, and I’ll back Master Jack to give it him.”

And so he stood calmly in the darkness, till Jack had, to the butler’s huge delight, proved victorious, when, having cautiously stolen back to the top of the stairs, he returned, walking heavily across the landing, and burst into the room. He was quickly followed by Mrs Somerton, at whose appearance Frank’s agonised bellows increased tenfold, while Jack went sullenly to the fireplace and waited for the scolding which he knew would undoubtedly be his. He was not disappointed, and a few minutes later he had retired to his room in great disgrace.

On the following morning Captain Somerton called him into his study, and explained with much kindness and sympathy that he had arranged to send him away to school.

“It will be the best place for you, Jack,” he said, patting him on the back. “You are not too young to go to a public school, and I can vouch for it that you will thoroughly enjoy the life. It will give you opportunities of playing games and of making friends that you have never had here. You will be leaving this house in about a week’s time, and till then, my boy, contrive to live on good terms

with Frank. Do not quarrel with him. A term at school will make all the difference, and when you return here you two lads will be the best of friends. There, that will do, Jack.”

Captain Somerton had come to a wise determination. His wife was strongly in favour of home education, and for that purpose a tutor attended daily at the Grange. But to the captain’s mind such a bringing up was far from judicious. He himself had had a public-school life, and had rubbed shoulders with hundreds of other boys, and he knew the value of such a training. He argued, and argued rightly, that in the majority of cases a boy who has never left his home becomes either a milk-sop or a conceited youth, and he was strongly of opinion that Jack should go to school. Now, much to his secret delight, there was an opportunity to separate the boys and send Jack away from home, and he seized it promptly.

Within two days of the quarrel between himself and Mrs Somerton, and between Jack and Frank, he had posted off to a popular and high-class public school not forty miles from London, where he arranged that Jack should be sent at once, as the term was about to commence and he was fortunate in obtaining a vacancy.

Meanwhile Jack had received the news of his impending change in life with the greatest pleasure. For the past three years his had been anything but a happy existence, and the knowledge that there was now to be a change was therefore a source of delight to him. He was not a quarrelsome lad; far from it. But for all that he was not the lad to put up with ill-treatment; and his stepbrother’s attempts to presume upon his year of seniority so often approached the verge of ill-treatment that trouble was constantly occurring.

Still, his father had asked him to be on good terms with Frank till he left for school, and Jack determined to act up to the promise he had given. He told his father he was sorry there had been a quarrel, and retired to the schoolroom again. Frank was there, seated again on the fire-guard, and greeted him with no very friendly looks, made all the more unpleasant by the unnatural size of his nose and lips. But he had had a lesson, and carefully confined himself to grimaces, fearing that Jack might renew the struggle.

The week passed slowly, so that Jack was heartily glad when the carriage drove up to the door, and he and his father were whirled away to the station, together with a couple of large school boxes. The past seven days had been decidedly dull and unpleasant. There had been an obvious coolness between Captain and Mrs Somerton, which affected the whole house, and in addition Frank had been silent and morose, and occasionally inclined to forget his caution and venture upon sarcastic jeers.

But Jack took it all calmly, the knowledge that he was going where he would make many friends helping him to do so. He therefore carefully abstained from answering, and when on the point of leaving, shook hands with his stepbrother heartily. Mrs Somerton gave him a kiss which was as cold as an icicle, and good-natured, fat old Banks squeezed his hand, and huskily wished him good luck and good-bye.

It was not long before they arrived at their destination, and that night Jack was one of the new boys at a large school where there were as many as four hundred. It was a new experience, but he enjoyed it, despite the many jokes which his comrades saw fit to make at his expense. For a few days he put up with them all good-naturedly, and soon felt quite at home; so much so, that before very long, when comparing his present life with the unhappy days he had lately spent at Frampton Grange, he had scarcely sufficient words of praise to bestow upon it.

He quickly fell into the ways of the school, and showed his masters what they might expect of him – which, to tell the truth, was not a great deal at first – and rapidly made friends with all his fellows. As with most popular lads, a nickname was very soon found for him, though why it should have been “Toby” not one of his comrades could have told you. Still, that is what it was, but it was used always in the most friendly way, which showed that he was a favourite.

Before many weeks had passed shouts of “Go it, Toby! Well hit, Toby!” resounded across the playing-fields; while a stranger, looking on at the game, might often have heard a sigh of relief from

certain select lads who, like himself, were spectators, as Jack walked out to take his place at the wickets, and “Now we’ll have better luck! Toby’ll give ’em beans!” muttered in very audible tones, and with every sign of satisfaction.

If it was wet, and outdoor games were impossible, Jack was to be found in the gymnasium, or in the workshop, using his hands as best he could, and learning to be dexterous with his fingers.

Thus, in one way and another, he spent his days. The terms rapidly succeeded one another, and almost before he could realise it, he was one of the big boys of the school. At home matters seemed to have improved, and separation had certainly had the effect of making Frank more friendly. But still he was not quite the fellow that Jack was accustomed to. Any attempt to rag or scuffle annoyed him, and sent him upstairs to rearrange his clothing; and as for a rough-and-tumble game of football, he looked on at such a thing with horror, as he also did at Jack’s venturesome attempts to ride a wild young colt which was out to grass in the paddock. Such recklessness was beyond his comprehension; he could not understand Jack’s high spirits, and always endeavoured to curb them as if he were in charge of him.

“Take him easy, Jack!” said Captain Somerton one day, noticing the difference between his sons. “Frank is not used to your rough ways. ’Pon my word, you are like a young bull in a china shop! I hear your shouts and your romping all over the house. But there, don’t let me discourage you. I love to hear it. It wakes the old place up. But be careful, Jack, and if you can, endeavour to copy Frank in politeness. See how well he behaves at meals, and notice how at afternoon-tea he helps your mother when we have callers. Everyone remarks upon his manners, and I can tell you, old boy, you should take a leaf from his book. I like to see you in good spirits, but I also wish you to be well accustomed to the ways of the people you will meet Remember this, politeness is never thrown away; the smallest attention to your elders – the mere opening of a door – is never forgotten, and has before now helped many a man on in the world.”

“Very well, Father, I’ll do my best,” replied Jack heartily. “But I’m an awful bungler, I am afraid. Only yesterday I tried to do as Frank does, and handed round the cream at tea in the drawing-room. I felt just like an elephant; my feet got in the way, and I almost came a cropper on the floor. Then, just as I was helping that old Mrs Tomkins, I caught sight of Spot racing round the house after a cat. By Jove! it was a near shave, and puss only just saved her skin by bolting across the lawn and jumping into the beech-tree. But the worst of it was, that while I was staring through the window old Tomkins was whispering something or other to Miss Brown, and as neither of us was watching her cup it moved a little to one side, and before I knew what was happening the cream was pouring down her dress. Mother says it was a brand-new one on that day, and that’s perhaps why the old lady looked at me so funnily. She said it didn’t matter, but I could see she was just boiling, and felt glad to get away. Then, of course, Mother had something to say to me, and Frank called me a clumsy beggar. That’s all I got for trying to be polite. But I’ll do what I can to learn; see if I don’t, Father!”

“Ha, ha, ha! That was an unfortunate beginning!” laughed Captain Somerton. “I can well imagine poor Mrs Tomkins’ disgust. You must be more careful next time. Stick to it, old boy! There are lots of other ways in which you can show your politeness, and if handing tea or cream is too much for you, you must leave it alone for a while.”

Jack was not discouraged by the want of success which attended his first attempt. He was an observant lad, and quickly picked up his brother’s manners, so much so that when the holidays were over, and he returned to school, his chums noticed that “Toby” was strangely altered. Out in the playing-fields he was still the same jolly, noisy fellow, always ready for a bit of fun. But at meal-times there was something different about him; he was quieter and more polished.

And the change, little as it was valued by his schoolfellows, rapidly caught the attention of his masters, and in consequence they took more notice of him, and became quite attached to the lad.

But in spite of this change in Jack, he led the way in all outdoor games, and indeed was as noisy and high-spirited as ever. So that during holiday times he and Frank still differed vastly from one

another. The latter had now donned the very highest of stick-up collars, and his ties were a source of the greatest anxiety to him. In addition, owing to Mrs Somerton's foolishness, his allowance of ready money enabled him to do as he wished as regards his clothes. And in consequence, he was never happier than when at his tailor's, trying on some new suit.

To many other boys this is a great pleasure, and indeed it is a gratifying thing to see a lad careful of his personal appearance, and always anxious to appear neat and tidy. But the boy who expends all his time and money in dressing himself, and to whom the rough clothes and boots and the dirt associated with a game of football are distasteful, is a fop, and a fop is the least attractive of all individuals.

This was what Frank was fast becoming. He was selfish and indolent, and gave himself such airs that to a lad of Jack's breezy nature he was perfectly intolerable. But Jack had promised his father to live peacefully with him, and he kept his promise faithfully, only disagreeing openly when Frank attempted to dictate to him or order him about. Then there was invariably an angry scene, during which Jack pointed out to his brother in plain, matter-of-fact terms that the consequences might be painful if he persisted in trying to rule; and Frank, remembering a struggle, now some years past, in which he had decidedly come off the worse, usually contented himself with some sarcastic remark, and went off to Mrs Somerton to tell her his grievances. So that, altogether, life at Frampton Grange was not so happy as it might have been, and Jack far preferred his school-days. What he did enjoy, however, were the summer holidays, when, by mutual consent, the family divided, and Jack and Captain Somerton went for a trip on the Continent.

At school he was now a prefect, and a most popular boy, and thoroughly appreciated his life. Though, like others of his age, he was looking forward to the time when he would take some position in the world a little more exalted than a school-boy's, he was yet in no hurry to say "Goodbye!" Cricket and football and his comrades were strong inducements to stay, and when at last the unexpected happened, and misfortune burst like a bomb at his feet, he looked back at the old days with a longing and regret which was never deeper in any boy's heart.

Chapter Two. Good-Bye to Home

Jack Somerton was not given to low spirits; to mope and worry about trifles was a foolish habit to which he had never yielded; but had he done so one beautiful evening in May, a few days before his return to school, he might very well have been excused, for matters had been anything but pleasant.

To begin with, he and Frank had fallen out seriously, partly owing to the latter's selfishness, and also partly, it must be owned, to Jack's hot-headed impulsiveness, which always caused him to blurt out at once exactly what was on his tongue, before considering the consequences. He was just one of those lads who liked what is called a "row" as little as did anyone, and sooner than sulk, or treasure up a fancied grievance, he preferred to end the matter at once. Not by blows, for he was not pugnacious either, but amicably, if possible, and if not – well in some other way.

Frank, on the other hand, could never forget that he was the elder of the two, and when Jack came home for the holidays a certain amount of friction always arose, because the former attempted to control his brother's actions.

"You can't do that," he would say, as Jack was on the point of saddling his father's favourite hunter for a canter in the paddock. "You know very well that Father does not allow anyone to ride Prince Charlie but himself."

"Who told you that?" would be Jack's answer. "Did Father say so, or ask you to see that no one rode the horse? Of course he didn't; Prince Charlie's a bit fresh at times, and that's why Father does not like anyone to ride him. But I have had him out before, and I am going to do so again."

Jack was not exactly a wilful boy, but his brother's attempts to rule him jarred his feelings. Had Captain Somerton told him he was not to ride his horse, Jack would certainly have obeyed him. But when it practically became a question as to whether he was to do as Frank said, and thereby acknowledge a certain amount of authority on his part, it was a different matter, and the opposition to his wishes very often drove him to doing what he would otherwise not have done.

Day by day these petty squabbles were almost certain to occur, and as the holidays neared the end they became even more frequent. One had arisen on the evening in question. It was not a serious one, but had, as usual, been caused by an attempt on Frank's part to order Jack about.

As a natural consequence Mrs Somerton had been put out, and had made Frampton Grange so exceedingly uncomfortable for Jack that he had at once gone to the stables, saddled his pony, and ridden through the village, out into the country.

"Well, I shall be jolly glad when the 15th comes, and I get back to school again," he said to himself as his pony walked slowly along the road. "I wish things weren't quite so wretched at home. It would be ripping if Frank were like Ted Humphreys, always jolly and ready for a bit of fun, and not for ever nagging and advising me, or ordering me not to do this or that. One would think I was a perfect baby still and he was a grown-up man. I'm sorry, that's all. Father feels the same too, I know. He as good as told me so the other day. Never mind, I won't let it worry me. I shall be out of the Grange in a few days, and when next term's done I shall go up to London to coach for the army."

How long Jack would have soliloquised it would be difficult to state. He was completely lost in the brownest of brown studies, so much so that he did not heed the noise of hoofs clattering up behind him, and only woke with a start when another rider had drawn his steed in close at his side, and given him a smack on the back which almost knocked the breath out of his body.

"Dreaming, eh? Good gracious, the lad's wool-gathering!" exclaimed the stranger – a dark, dapper little man, with a clean-shaven face, – giving vent to a hearty chuckle. "What in the world's the matter, lad?"

"Oh, is that you, Dr Hanly?" exclaimed Jack.

“Of course it is! – who else would it be? What’s the matter, my boy?” answered the doctor kindly. “Troubles at home – eh? Well, don’t worry about them. They’ll mend themselves, and you’ll be back at school soon.”

Dr Hanly looked sympathisingly at Jack, and patted him gently on the shoulder. He was an old friend of Captain Somerton, and had known for a long while how matters were at the Grange. Indeed, outside the family no one knew so well what quarrels there were, and what trials the captain and his son had to put up with. Nor was it in his professional capacity alone that the doctor had obtained his information. He had long been an intimate friend of Jack’s father, and had known and appreciated the former mistress of Frampton Grange.

“Well, Jack, when do you leave school?” he continued. “The captain tells me he intends sending you shortly to a crammer’s, who will coach you for the army. Fine profession, my boy; a fine profession! You’ll make one in a long line, for, if I make no mistake, the Somertons have held commissions for years. I’ve no doubt you will enjoy a soldier’s life. From what one hears it is not all so smooth and easy as one would think. There’s a gay uniform and a jolly life on the surface, but behind the scenes there’s sure to be plenty of tough work – marching and drilling and so on. But – halloo! – who’s this! Someone in a desperate hurry evidently. Want me for sure; a doctor never has a moment he can call his own.”

Doctor Hanly’s last words were caused by the sudden appearance of a light cart, which at that moment whirled round a distant bend in the road, and came racing along towards them, behind a galloping horse. In the cart, standing up and using his whip freely, was a man whose cap and clothes showed that he had some connection with the railway.

As he reached Jack and the doctor he pulled in his horse with a jerk, and waving his arms excitedly, shouted: “There’s been an awful smash on the railway, sir, midway between here and Redley. The station-master said as he’d seen you a-riding this way, and told me I was to let yer know that an engine and truck would stop at Harvey’s crossing, and take yer on to where the line is blocked. It’s been an awful smash, sir, and I heard nigh everyone in the London express has been badly hurt!”

“Why, that’s the train in which Father said he should return this evening!” exclaimed Jack, suddenly feeling a chill of fear run through his body.

“Come with me then, lad,” cried the doctor. “This way. It’s only a few hundred yards. Perhaps you will be of use. Go back to the station, my man,” he called out as they were setting off, “and tell the station-master to send out blankets, brandy, and any linen he can get hold of, as quickly as he can. Come along, Jack. I can hear the engine.”

They both put their animals into a gallop, jumped a narrow ditch which flanked the road, dashed across a broad stretch of common land, and finally pulled up at a gate which closed a level crossing over the railway. The engine and truck were already there.

“Hitch your reins on to this post,” said Dr Hanly calmly, making his own horse fast. “Now, on to the engine! Every moment may be of the utmost value. Send her ahead, my man.”

Jack climbed on to the foot-plate of the engine, followed by the doctor, who at once sat down on the driver’s seat and proceeded to inspect sundry instruments and bandages with which two capacious side pockets of his coat were stocked. He was as cool as if on an ordinary journey. Carefully selecting three of his instruments, he put the case back in his pocket, and commenced to cut a sheet of lint into small strips. These he folded up methodically and gave to Jack to hold. Then he rose to his feet, and looked along the line in front, waiting quietly for the moment when the engine should reach the scene of the disaster, and enable him to commence his work of rescuing the injured. What a contrast there was between this dapper little man, cool and collected, with all his wits about him, waiting for his work to begin with a quietness born of long experience, and Jack, standing on the other side of the foot-plate, dodging his head from side to side to obtain a better view of the rails, holding the bundle of lint with fingers which trembled with nervous excitement, whilst his heart thumped against his ribs with a force which almost frightened him!

“Steady, Jack, steady!” exclaimed the doctor, smiling encouragingly at him. “Nothing was ever done well in a hurry. Keep cool, and you will be able to help me considerably. Ah, there it is! We shall be close up in a few seconds.”

As the doctor spoke the engine ran round a wide curve, and came in full sight of the spot where the accident had occurred. The axle of the driving-wheels of the express engine had suddenly snapped, causing the whole train to leave the rails, and plough along on the gravel. Then the heavy engine had suddenly toppled over and come to an abrupt halt, while the carriages had been piled on top of it and on one another in hopeless confusion.

It was indeed a dreadful disaster. The guard’s van and the first passenger truck lay crushed out of all shape on the gravel, while on top of them the others were heaped in disorder, with dangling wheels and shattered woodwork, the whole being surmounted by the last carriage of all, the end of which was thrown up as high as a house in the air.

About twenty men had already collected near, and these at once set to work, at Dr Hanly’s orders, to climb into the carriages and bring out the passengers. Jack joined in the work, feeling giddy and thoroughly upset at the awful sights he saw, and dreading that every body taken from the wreckage would prove to be his father’s.

But the doctor, guessing what his feelings were, called him to help in bandaging up one of the injured passengers, and kept him hard at work for an hour at least; so that when Captain Somerton’s body was at last discovered, crushed almost out of recognition, Jack was not there to see it and be shocked at the sight. Indeed, he did not hear the tidings for some time, for the doctor required his help; and before long Jack was so much absorbed in his work that he had forgotten his nervousness, and was applying splints and bandages together with his friend with a skill and coolness which would have done credit to an older hand. But all the time he was oppressed by a feeling that a calamity had befallen him.

When all the injured had been seen to, Jack was at liberty to make enquiries, when he soon learnt that his father was among the killed.

“It is a sad thing, my dear boy, a shocking accident,” murmured Dr Hanly, taking him on one side, “and your grief is natural, for you have lost the best friend you ever had in the world. Go home now and break the news. I will come to-morrow, and after that, if you are in any difficulty come to me.”

The next few days were exceedingly trying ones for Jack. Frampton Grange was even more miserable than before, for there was no sympathy amongst the inmates, and therefore no consolation in talking to one another about the terrible accident which had led to Captain Somerton’s death.

Two days were occupied in attending and giving evidence at the inquest; then there was the funeral, after which Mrs Somerton and her two sons returned to the Grange with Dr Hanly, a few relatives of the deceased captain, and two austere gentlemen, who proved to be lawyers. The will of the late owner of the house was then produced.

A quarter of an hour later it had been read, the party had broken up, and Jack found himself the future owner of Frampton Grange and all the wealth his father had possessed, and alone in the world save for a stepmother and stepbrother who cared little for him.

Captain Somerton had made one very big mistake during his life. He had married, for the second time, a woman upon whom his choice should never have fallen. This he recognised too late, but not so late as to prevent him from altering his will accordingly.

“I leave to my son, John Hartly Somerton, all that I possess,” ran the will, “to be held in trust by my wife and Dr Hanly, the former of whom shall have the use of Frampton Grange till the said John Hartly Somerton shall attain the age of twenty-six.”

Mention was made that Mrs Somerton had sufficient means of her own to live in the same style as before. In addition to this, there were various small legacies to the servants, a sum was set aside for Jack's education and for his expenses in entering the army, and another sum for the upkeep of the Grange until it came into his own management.

"Come over and see me to-morrow, Jack," whispered the doctor as soon as the will had been read. "I am now a kind of guardian to you, and shall feel it my business to give you advice. I shall be in about tea-time, when we can be sure of a quiet chat."

"Thanks, Doctor," replied Jack. "You can expect me at the time you mention."

On the following afternoon, therefore, Jack mounted his pony and rode through the village and away up the hill to the doctor's house.

"Now, my boy, what are you going to do with yourself?" asked the doctor, when they had finished their tea and were strolling in the garden.

"Well, first of all, as you know, Doctor, I am not to go back to school. I am awfully sorry, as I have been very happy there, and we hoped to pull off some good cricket matches this term. But now that is all knocked on the head for me. Do you know, I believe Father had some kind of feeling that something was going to happen to him, for he left a letter with the lawyer instructing me to leave school and begin coaching for the army immediately his death occurred. He mentioned that he would like me to read at home with Frank, but really, Doctor, I feel more inclined to go straight up to London, as I had intended all along. You know Frank and I are not too friendly. We don't get on well together; and I'm afraid I don't hit it off very well with Mother either."

"Yes, I know that, my boy. It's very unfortunate," remarked Dr Hanly. "Still, it is the case. I believe you will do well to go up to London at an early date, for, if I am any judge, you are still more likely to quarrel at home now that there is no one to keep the peace. Think it over, and if you make up your mind to do as I say, come over and see me again, and we will arrange to go up together. London is a very big place, and it is a good thing to have a friend or two there when you go. I have many, and will ask them to look after you. Take your time about deciding. It would not do to leave home immediately after your father's death."

Jack rode slowly back to the Grange, and long before he got there had come to the decision that it would be best for all if he left home and went up to the big city.

"We're certain to have rows if I stay," he thought. "Then perhaps Frank will try to boss me, as he has tried before; so, altogether, I shall be doing everyone a good turn by going."

His conviction was strengthened during the next few days, for the very sight of him seemed to be an annoyance to his stepmother. The truth was, that Mrs Somerton was highly incensed at the contents of her husband's will. At the least she had expected a third, or perhaps more, of the estate to be left to Frank. But that all should have gone to Jack was a bitter pill which she found too difficult to swallow.

"How your father can have been so unjust I cannot imagine!" she had the bad grace to remark to Jack on the evening after his chat with Dr Hanly. "You and Frank are equally his sons, and should have been treated alike. But it was always the same. You were to have first place, and Frank was to have what was left. It is abominable, and if it were not that your father was always unjust in dealing with Frank, I really should begin to think that he was out of his senses when he made that will."

Jack listened to his mother's reproach, and was on the point of indignantly protesting; but better counsel prevailed, and he kept silent.

Two weeks later he and Dr Hanly took the mid-day train for London, leaving Mrs Somerton still in a very sullen mood, and Frank standing in a lordly manner on the steps of Frampton Grange, with an ill-disguised air of triumph about him which seemed to say that now at least he would be head and ruler of the establishment.

Jack had only once before been to London, and when the four-wheeler in which he and his friend were driving to their hotel became jammed in the dense traffic which converges at the Mansion

House he was perfectly astounded. Nor was his astonishment lessened when he noticed how the busmen and drivers joked and laughed as they drove their vehicles through the narrowest parts with an accuracy which was wonderful; while tall, powerful-looking policemen stood in the thick of it all, and with a wave of a hand arrested the flow in one direction, while a flood of omnibuses and carriages swept by in the other.

“Fine fellows, aren’t they!” exclaimed Dr Hanly. “And many of them are old soldiers too. I really do not think there is another force in the world that equals them. They are well-trained and disciplined; polite and obliging, especially to country-cousins like ourselves, and with a power which is simply wonderful. I have never seen its equal, though I have known of many attempts to copy. In Paris, for instance, the policeman’s efforts to control the traffic, and make a street-crossing comparatively safe, are simply ludicrous.”

Ten minutes later the cab drew up at the hotel, and their baggage was carried in.

“Now, Jack, you can do as you like for the next hour,” cried the doctor. “I have letters to write, and so will go to my room. You had better get on a bus and go as far as you can in the time. I should advise your taking one which runs through the Strand and on past Charing Cross and Westminster. But wherever you go you will find it interesting.”

Jack had never gone alone through the streets of London before, but he was quite old enough to take care of himself, and having selected a bus, with the words “Strand, Charing Cross, and Victoria” painted on the side, he boarded it while it was running at a respectable pace, just as every boy likes to do, and seated himself in the garden-seat on top, just behind the driver.

“Afternoon, sir!” the latter, a jolly, red-faced individual, exclaimed.

“Good afternoon!” Jack replied. “I’m up in town for the second time in my life, and if you can tell me the names of the various buildings we pass, I shall be much obliged to you.”

“Ah, then you ain’t the first gentleman from the country as I’ve taken round!” answered the busman, grinning with pleasure, for, seated for many hours during the day on his box, an occasional chat came as a treat, which relieved the monotony.

“Well now, sir, that there building’s the Law Courts, and a fine place it is too; and under that funny-looking arch on t’other side is the Temple, where all these lawyer chaps has their lodgings and their church.”

As they drove through the Strand the driver showed him the various theatres, and finally pointed to the National Gallery across Trafalgar Square.

“That’s where all the best pictures go to, sir,” he said, “and if yer was to pass along on the right of it you’d see the sodger-sergeants a-walking up and down a-looking for recruits. And a fine bag they are making nowadays. What with old Kruger and the Transvaal Boers there’s likely to be trouble coming, and that’s what draws recruits. When there’s a chance of active service the young chaps comes up in scores. Funny, ain’t it, when yer think of other countries where pretty well every man has to join the army, whether he likes or not; while here, in free England, it’s left to choice, and no one need belong who doesn’t like!

“Do yer know who it is who’s perched up yonder a-looking down towards Westminster?” he continued, nodding to the Nelson Monument.

“Yes, that’s Nelson, of course,” answered Jack. “I’ve been here once before, I remember, to see the square and the fountains playing.”

“Nelson it is, right enough, sir, but he ain’t the only chap as perches himself up there. There’s a lot of chaps stands on the stonework below at times and spouts to the crowd. Agitators or something of the sort they calls ’em. At any rate they’re fellers as has got too long tongues in their mouths, I should think. Then it’s round that moniment that Englishmen gathers when there’s a row abroad, so as to let everybody know what they thinks about the matter. Ah! Trafalgar Square’s a useful sort of place, if it ain’t so very nice to look at.”

The omnibus now turned down Parliament Street, swept past Whitehall and the Horse Guards, and finally drew up at Westminster.

With a cheery "Thank you, and good-bye" to the genial driver, Jack jumped off and walked towards Westminster Bridge, where he stopped for a quarter of an hour or more, looking at the swarm of vehicles crossing, and at the panting tugs and the lazy barges floating on the river. Then he walked along the Embankment, back into the Strand, and so returned to his hotel.

"Well, Jack, to-morrow we will have a good run round the place," exclaimed the doctor as they finished their dinner, "and after that we must find rooms for you somewhere, and introduce you to the crammer. As regards the rooms, I think it will be a good plan for you to board with someone. It is very lonely for a lad of your age in lodgings by himself, as I remember well, for I spent four years of that kind of life when I was a student. To-night, if you are not too tired, we will go to some place of amusement; a theatre for choice."

Accordingly they went to Drury Lane, and thoroughly enjoyed the piece and the wonders of modern stage scenery.

On the following day they went to various other places, and in the evening looked up an old friend of the doctor's, a barrister, who lived near Victoria Station.

"Look here, Jackson," said Dr Hanly as soon as he had introduced his young friend, "I am on the look-out for rooms for this lad. He is to go to a crammer's and work up for the army. The next examination takes place in about six months, and, if possible, I want to get him into some comfortable place where he will not be too much alone."

"Why not try this house, then?" answered Mr Jackson. "I have been here for five years now, and have found it comfortable and reasonable. The people who run the place are most respectable, in fact they are gentlefolks who have been compelled to let rooms owing to reduced circumstances. I have two rooms, and so have Clarke and another man. I know there are two more vacant ones, for Franklin left for India last week. We generally breakfast and dine with the Eltons (the people who let the rooms), and we usually lunch outside."

"What do you say, Jack?" asked the doctor. "You are the one chiefly concerned."

"It seems to be just the very thing, Doctor," Jack answered. "It is close to the address of the crammer, and therefore suitable in that way. Could we look at the rooms now, and come to a decision?"

Accordingly the vacant accommodation was inspected, and at once engaged. A week later Jack had quite settled down, the doctor had returned home, and work at the crammer's had begun.

Jack enjoyed the life. The allowance which he was entitled to draw was a comfortable one, which enabled him to meet all his current expenses and still find something in his pocket with which to pay for amusements. His work usually kept him engaged from ten in the morning till four in the afternoon, and every night except Saturday and Sunday he did a couple of hours' reading.

Between tea-time and dinner-time he generally went for a long walk, as to a boy of his habits constant exercise was essential. Sometimes he would make his way along the Embankment and on past Chelsea, for the river always had an attraction for him; while at other times he would go in the opposite direction.

One Saturday evening, just after dark, he was slowly returning towards Victoria, when a shrill whistle suddenly sounded in front of him, followed by a loud shout. Rain was pouring down at the time, so that the streets were practically deserted, while on the Embankment there was not a soul about.

Again the shrill whistle sounded, followed by a shout, this time less loud and decidedly muffled.

Jack's suspicions were at once aroused, and, dropping his umbrella, he took to his heels and ran along the pavement. A few yards farther on scuffling and the sound of heavy blows reached his ears, while, almost at the same moment, a flickering gas lamp cast a feeble light across the damp pavement, showing the base of Cleopatra's Needle, close to which was a group of struggling figures.

A minute later Jack had reached the spot, to find that four ruffians had set upon two well-dressed gentlemen, one a man of some forty years of age, while the younger was no older than himself.

As Jack reached them the latter was leaning half-stunned against the stonework, where he had been knocked by a staggering blow, while at his feet rolled a police whistle with which he had made a brave attempt to call assistance.

The older gentleman stood with his back to the lamppost, and as Jack reached his side knocked one of the ruffians flat on his back on the pavement.

Jack made up his mind instantly as to what he ought to do. Without stopping he dashed up to the feet of the younger man, picked up the whistle, and next moment was at the side of the older man. Then he placed the whistle to his lips and blew with all his might.

“Come on! What are yer standing there for?” exclaimed one of the ruffians, turning fiercely on his companions, who had drawn away as Jack arrived upon the scene. “He ain’t a peeler! He’s only some clerk as don’t know when to keep himself to himself. Now, let’s do for ’em all, and clear away with the swag!”

A second later Jack was forced to drop his whistle and defend himself, for the three ruffians rushed at them. The gentleman sent one of them reeling back with a tremendous blow on the chest, and was instantly engaged with the second; while the leader of the gang, a burly, brutal-looking fellow, singled Jack out and struck at his head with both fists in quick succession.

To attempt to guard was hopeless. It would have required a far stronger young fellow than Jack to break the blows. But he escaped by ducking rapidly, rising the next moment to strike fiercely at the man, and then throw himself upon him and drag him to the ground.

They fell heavily, the jar shaking the breath out of their bodies, and causing a sudden pain to shoot through Jack’s thigh. But though his left leg was now useless to him, he stuck to his man in spite of the excruciating pain it caused him, and, shifting his grasp for a moment, threw his arms round his antagonist and pinned him to the ground.

A few seconds passed, and just as his strength was giving way, and the ruffian was on the point of wrenching himself free, a policeman’s helmet appeared above them, a powerful hand grasped his opponent’s neck, and the man was dragged away.

What happened afterwards was a complete blank to Jack.

Chapter Three. Off To Africa

When Jack came to his senses again he was astonished to find himself tucked up in a cosy bed, with clean white sheets and a red counterpane. It was placed in the centre of a row of beds which were precisely similar, and which ran down one side of a large and comfortable-looking ward, on the opposite side of which there was a fire burning brightly, and a table round which sat three neatly-dressed nurses.

Jack slowly ran his eyes round the ward, noted that most of the other beds had occupants, and that the three nurses looked decidedly pretty in their white caps and aprons. And all the while he wondered mildly what it all meant, why he was there, and what sort of a place it was. Then, like others who have been seriously ill for a considerable time and are almost too weak to move a hand, he closed his eyes again and fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke he lay quite still, with closed eyelids, listening to voices near his bedside.

“He’ll do well now, Nurse,” he heard someone say, “and I am glad to be able to tell you that the worst is over. It was a difficult job to get the thigh in satisfactory position, and nicely put upon the splint. But it’s done, and done well, I think I may say. Your young friend will make steady progress now, sir,” the voice continued, “and from what I have learnt I am sure you will be very pleased to hear it. Good-day! I must be going now, as I have several other patients to look to.”

“Good-day!” was repeated heartily by someone else, and then the owner of the first voice moved away.

“I am delighted to hear the doctor’s report,” somebody else exclaimed, in tones which were unmistakably those of Dr Hanly. “He has met with a very nasty accident, and it takes quite a load from my mind to hear he is doing well. By all accounts he must have increased the severity of the injury by sticking to that fellow as he did. He’s a plucky lad.”

“Plucky, my dear sir! I should think so indeed!” answered a third voice. “Why, I owe a lot to your young ward. There was really no call for him to come to our help; but he did so without hesitation, with the result that he got badly smashed, while Wilfred and I were merely a little bruised and knocked about.”

“I’m glad to hear you say so, Mr Hunter,” was the doctor’s reply. “It is just like the lad to get into a mess in an attempt to help others who were in a tight corner. But we had better be moving away, I think, or we may disturb him.”

“Don’t go, Doctor,” Jack feebly murmured at this moment, opening his eyes and looking up at his friend. “Tell me how I came to be here, and all about it. It’s awfully rummy! I cannot understand why I should be lying in bed, when only a minute ago I was well and strong and walking along the Embankment.”

“Why, good gracious me! that was a week ago, Jack! This is a hospital in London, and you are in bed because your thigh is broken. But you must get to sleep. Mr Hunter and I will come again to-morrow.”

Jack obediently closed his eyes, wondered in a dreamy kind of way who Mr Hunter might be, and who was the plucky lad he had been talking about, and promptly fell asleep.

When he became conscious again a nurse was bending over him, and, feeling stronger and more lively, he was propped up in bed as far as his splint would allow, and given a cup of tea. From that day he rapidly improved. The pain, which had been severe at first after he had recovered consciousness, had now entirely gone, and about three weeks after his accident his bed was lifted on to a long wheeled chair, and he was able to get about the ward and chat with the other patients.

Almost daily Mr Hunter and his son Wilfred came to see Jack, and very soon the two lads, who were within a few days of the same age, had become fast friends.

“By Jove!” Wilfred exclaimed one day as he was sitting by Jack’s side, “it was touch and go for us when those four blackguards attacked us, and you were a perfect brick to come up in time to lend us a helping hand.”

“Oh, humbug! What else could I have done?” answered Jack. “I heard your whistle and shouts, and guessed there was a row on. I couldn’t stand still, could I? so of course I came along to see what was up. Then, when I found it was an uneven fight, I tacked myself on to the side which wanted me most.”

“It’s all very well your talking like that, Jack, but you know as well as I do that you might just as well have run in the opposite direction, especially when you saw what brutes the men were who were attacking us. But we’ll say no more about it just now. I’ll get even with you though, old chap, if I can manage it, one of these fine days.”

“Then that’s agreed,” answered Jack; “but before you drop the subject, tell me what the row was really about. I suppose those fellows were after your money!”

“Money! Yes, but in a different form from that in which you usually see it. You know, Father runs a big store out in Johannesburg, and deals in everything. You can get anything, from a bag of peas or a tin tack to Kimberley diamonds of the first water, from his shop, and it’s the last that those ruffians were after. But here is Father. Ask him, and he will tell you all about it.”

“Well, Jack, getting along nicely, are you?” exclaimed the latter heartily. “And you want to know how it was we were attacked by those ruffians? It’s very simple. I have come over from South Africa for a holiday, and to see the old home. My wife and Wilfred came too, and during our stay here I have managed to combine business and pleasure. I brought over some diamonds, and on the day you came so opportunely to our aid I had been to a stone merchant in the city, and was returning with all those he had not bought from me; I should say some fifteen thousand pounds’ worth. It would have been a good haul if they had managed to get away with the bag. No doubt they knew all about me, and had tracked me all the way from the hotel. But they made a little mistake. You see in my younger days I had to rough it pretty well, and of recent years, while living in the Transvaal, life has not been altogether smooth. Every Boer’s hand there is against the Englishman, Uitlanders as they call us, and so one has to be particularly wary.

“Immediately I caught sight of those rascals I guessed their game, but I can tell you, my lad, it would have been all U P if it hadn’t been for you and the whistle. Well, we came out of it pretty comfortably, save for your fractured thigh, and as soon as you are fit to go out those fellows will be tried and, I trust, will get heavily sentenced.

“By the way, my boy, have you thought about the future? You know it will be at least three months before that leg of yours is really strong again; at least that is what the surgeon says.”

“No, I haven’t given it a thought, Mr Hunter. I suppose I shall go home to the Grange for a month or so, and then return to the crammer’s. Not that that would be much good, for I cannot possibly go up for the next exam. I haven’t done nearly enough reading, and should certainly get ploughed if I attempted it.”

“Why not come out to Africa with us?” said Mr Hunter earnestly. “We go as soon as those ruffians are tried, and we should be good companions on the way. Besides, it would be a splendid ‘pick-me-up’ for you; you would get the air on the voyage, and still be able to keep your leg in splints, or whatever is found necessary.”

“Mr Hunter, it’s awfully kind of you, and I should enjoy it immensely!” Jack suddenly blurted out, and then stopped abruptly as the thought of the expense entailed flashed across his mind.

“Then it’s settled,” exclaimed Mr Hunter. “I thought you’d jump at the idea. I’ve spoken to Dr Hanly about it, and he and your mother are quite willing for you to go. It will be the best thing you could possibly do under the circumstances, and besides, you may find that the experience will be

of real service to you later on; for if you join the army it is more than probable that you will find yourself out in Africa with your regiment before many years are gone. I expect we shall sail in about a month's time. It will be another four weeks before we reach Johnny's Burg, as we call it, and then you can stay with us just as long as you please."

Jack was delighted at the prospect before him, and made up his mind to get his leg sound again as quickly as possible. Save for a trip on the Continent with his father he had never left the shores of old England, and now the knowledge that in a short time he would be on board a huge ocean-going vessel bound for Africa, the land of gold and diamonds, Zulus, ostriches, and lions, filled him with the highest spirits, and served, to no small extent, to relieve the tedium of his long stay in hospital.

A month afterwards he was staying with the Hunters at a fine hotel near Piccadilly, and a week later had been able to give evidence at the Old Bailey – where he was complimented for his pluck by the judge, – and had seen the four ruffians who had attempted to obtain possession of the bag of diamonds condemned to heavy sentences.

In a fortnight they had set sail from Southampton, and were well in the Channel. It was a lovely summer's day, and Jack enjoyed the change immensely. Reclining in a long cane chair, propped up with cushions and wrapped in a rug, he was a subject of interest to the passengers, and before many days had passed was on the best of terms with all. Indeed, had he but known it, he was thought a deal of by them, for Mr Hunter and Wilfred had not failed, when they joined the gentlemen in the smoking-room, to tell how his leg became damaged; while Mrs Hunter confided it to the ladies after dinner in the drawing-room.

Day by day Jack's leg grew stronger and more firmly knit, and very soon, when the sea was quite smooth, he was able to hobble about the deck with the help of a crutch. Before the voyage was over he had discarded the plaster splint with which his thigh had been encased, and by the time the big ship steamed into Table Bay and whistled for the authorities to come off and give instructions as to where it was to berth, he had become quite an ordinary individual once more, and there was nothing noticeable about this strong, broad-shouldered young Englishman save the fact that he walked with a slight limp. It was a glorious morning when Mr and Mrs Hunter and the two boys landed, and as they were not to take the train for Johannesburg till the following day, Wilfred was able to escort Jack round the town and out into the country.

Jack enjoyed it all immensely. The streets were much the same as in London, and in many respects it reminded him of home. But the people walking about were different; Englishmen were certainly in evidence, but there was a good sprinkling of other nationalities, French, German, Kafir, and especially Dutch.

The country outside, however, was very different. The vegetation, of a semi-tropical nature, was more luxuriant and green, while the scorching sun overhead, and the dusty roads underfoot, which reflected the dazzling rays, were a complete change from what he had known in this country.

Still, in spite of the glaring sun there was no doubt of the picturesqueness of Cape Town, backed as it was by its green slopes and fields, and frowned over by the sharply-cut summit of Table Mountain.

Two days later the party arrived in Johannesburg, tired and weary after their long railway journey.

"Now, Jack, you must do just as you like while you are here," said Mr Hunter a few days after they had reached this modern city in which the Uitlander population of the Transvaal had, for the most part, taken up its residence. "Of course you will want to see Pretoria, and get a peep at his honour, dear old Kruger, whom we Englishmen love so much. Then, perhaps, you would like to accompany me to Kimberley. I go there about twice a month, and though it is a dusty, uninteresting sort of place at first sight, yet I think I can promise to open your eyes when I show you the mines. You have heard of them, of course, and are aware that they are valued at millions of pounds. On our way there, or on our return, we could take a peep at Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State, where President Steyn has his residence. It will be all new to you, and, I dare say, sufficiently interesting."

“Thank you very much, Mr Hunter!” Jack replied. “I am already awfully interested, and should certainly like to see all there is in the country. I wonder whether you would object to my helping sometimes in the store. I am quite strong enough for that now, and I should very much like to learn how you manage matters, and particularly how your books are kept. I am sorry to say I am a terribly poor hand at accounts. Mine never came out right at the end of the month in London.”

“Mind! Of course not, Jack! I am glad to think you would care to do it. Place yourself in Wilfred’s hands. He knows all about it, and will show you how the business is carried on. Who knows? One of these days you may find shopkeeping more congenial than army life. Out here there are lots of young fellows who come from the best of houses in the old country, and yet are not ashamed to pull off their coats and put their shoulders to the wheel. Why, one man of my acquaintance, who is in a very prosperous way of business just now, in spite of the exorbitant taxation with which we have to put up, owns to a title in England, and when he was there would have no more thought of turning out in the streets of London without the time-honoured tail-coat and topper than he would have thought of flying. And here he is now, not too proud to make his living by honest means, simply because he happened to be born a lord. And there are lots more like him too. Dear me, what a shock their parents would have if they could see them now, working behind their counters with sleeves rolled up, and selling groceries or ironware as if they had been at it all their lives!”

On the following day Jack took the train for Pretoria, and had the good fortune to catch a glimpse of Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal Republic, as he drove by in his carriage.

“Father says he’s the deepest and cleverest schemer that ever was!” exclaimed Wilfred, nodding after the carriage, “and from all one hears there can be little doubt about it. They say, too, that he is a religious man, and is something like the Puritans of old. Whatever he is, however, he is certainly one of our bitterest enemies. He simply loathes the sight of an Englishman, and won’t speak our language. He forgets all we have done for him, for I can tell you, there would have been no Kruger and no Boers in the Transvaal if it hadn’t been for our country.”

“He’s a funny-looking fellow at any rate,” answered Jack; “and why in the name of all that’s rummy he should want to wear a topper in this outlandish place is more than I can guess. If I met him at home I should take him for some dissenting minister, a trifle hard-up and out-at-elbow.”

“Hard-up!” exclaimed Wilfred in disgust. “Don’t make that mistake, Jack. Paul Kruger is no pauper. He is certainly one of the wealthiest of the Boers.”

And this was exactly the case. President Kruger was a man who had for many years not only managed the affairs of this particular country, but had also contrived to look well after his own. It was only a glimpse that Jack caught of him, but it was quite sufficient to impress the features on his mind.

Paul Kruger was a heavily-built man, arrayed in black from head to foot, which shone as all threadbare and worn-out clothing does. On his head was a fairly presentable top hat, and in his fat, ungainly hands he held a pair of black kid gloves.

But his face was the part which riveted one’s attention.

In anyone else’s case but the president’s it would have passed without comment, especially amongst a gathering of typical Boers. But, holding the position he did, one looked a second time, and noticed the wrinkled, jowly cheeks, fringed with a belt of straggly hair; the heavy, sleepy-looking eyes, overhung by bushy brows, and the general appearance of obtuseness.

And yet it was this man who, for the sake of a boundless ambition, was destined to defy the might of England, ay, and stagger it with his blows; and he it was, this sheepish-looking Boer, who for years and years had been secretly dreaming and planning – planning to oust the Britishers from their fair colonies, and claim for himself the proud position and title of President – perhaps King – of the United States of Africa.

Shortly after his return from Pretoria, Jack settled down to life in Johannesburg, and soon found himself quite one of the Uitlanders. His leg was now practically strong again, though he had not yet got rid of the limp. Still, for all that, he was able to get about, and even enjoy a game of cricket.

Soon, too, he became accustomed to life in the store conducted by Mr Hunter, and made it a regular custom to help wherever he could during the morning hours. It was really a large shop, with several departments, and with a big storehouse behind. The main entrance was quite an imposing one, and a common place for friends to meet, while just inside was a large office in which the books were kept.

Jack was often here, and did not take long to master the intricacies of book-keeping, so much so that he soon became of real help to Mr Hunter.

In the afternoon he played cricket or drove out with Wilfred, and in the evening he and his friend frequently sauntered into the town, and played billiards at a large restaurant which was a popular rendezvous. Here he met numbers of Englishmen, and in addition several Boers, some of whom he learnt to like. But the younger men were for the most part odious, and gave themselves such airs that the Uitlanders held aloof from them.

Now it happened that Jack and Wilfred frequently played with two other young fellows, one of whom was a delicate lad about Jack's age, who had come to Africa for the sake of his health. His name was Mathews, and Jack took a great fancy to him. He was quiet and dignified, seldom spoke unless asked a question, and was as inoffensive and harmless a being as anyone could have wished to meet.

But this very mildness was to be the cause of trouble, as Jack was soon to learn.

Amongst the young Boers who visited the restaurant was one tall young man of about twenty-five, who made himself more objectionable than any of the others. He was bumptious to a degree, and openly expressed his hatred of all Englishmen. Even in the billiard saloon his sneers were loudly uttered, so that Jack itched to thrash him on several occasions. But Wilfred dissuaded him.

"Be careful, Jack," he exclaimed earnestly, one evening, when the Boer had been more than usually hostile. "Don't take any notice of the brute, or it will lead you into trouble. I know him well, and so does Father, and I can tell you that Piet Maartens, as he calls himself, is a scoundrel, and a most dangerous man to have anything to do with. He is thickly in with the Kruger gang, and if all is true that has been said of him, he has a reputation that would hang a man in England. I have no wish to blacken his character. I merely tell the truth when I say that he has treated more than one of the Kaffirs on his father's farm so brutally as to cause death. Keep clear of him, Jack!"

"I'll do my best, Wilfred," Jack answered slowly, "but he'd better look out. I'm not going to stand quietly by much longer and listen to his sneers. One would think we Englishmen were dirt beneath his feet. Up to the present his remarks have been general, but I'll tell you this, if he shouts any of his names at me, I'll show him that an Englishman is as good as, and perhaps better than, a Boer. I've got a game leg, but that won't prevent me from tackling him if it's necessary."

"Take my advice; keep clear of him," repeated Wilfred. "After all, if you had lived all your life here you would have become accustomed to the doings of these young Boers. Ever since Majuba they have been brought up to think of us and our soldiers as cowards, and their absolute ignorance prevents them from seeing their mistake. I never take any notice of them."

"Yes, I dare say that is the best plan," Jack answered stubbornly; "but when I was at school a fellow had to take the consequences of what he said. If he called another chap names there was safe to be a row, and someone got a licking. That's what happens in ordinary life, and it's going to be the same here if that Piet Maartens doesn't look out. Perhaps he could lick me if we had a fight, but I'd rather get knocked about and teach the fellow manners than sit down quietly and be insulted."

Jack meant every word he said. Himself a kind-hearted and polite young fellow, to hurt the feelings of a comrade, or of a foreigner who happened to be anywhere within hearing of him, was the last thing he would have thought of doing. And to be forced to listen to sneers which were meant for any Englishman who might happen to hear them was so galling that it set his blood on fire. Just as his stepbrother's attempts to control his actions had raised his ire, so did the behaviour of this young Boer irritate him and stir him to anger. Jack was not pugnacious, but the mere suspicion that he was in the presence of a bully ruffled him, and his meetings with Piet Maartens had so convinced him

that this was what he was at heart, that Jack, in his own quiet dogged way, determined to discomfit him at the very first opportunity.

“He’s a bully,” he muttered to himself after Wilfred’s warning, “and I’m not going to put up with his sneers any longer.”

A few nights later the four lads were playing billiards in the restaurant, and the opposite table was occupied by Piet Maartens and a friend, while a number of Uitlanders and Boers were looking on. Jack had completely forgotten his determination, and, wrapped up in the game, had scarcely noticed the other players. Mathews was his partner, and, suddenly getting the balls into a favourable position, was adding rapidly to the score. The onlookers became interested, and all stood up to watch the game. Even Piet Maartens stepped over, and, rudely pushing Jack aside, craned his head and watched as Mathews played a stroke.

“Come here, Fritz,” he cried loudly. “Come and see this Uitlander. See, after all one of these Britishers is some good. Well, there is room for improvement, but whatever happens they will never make brave men.”

Instantly the whole of the occupants of the room became silent, while Mathews turned round and faced the Boer.

“You look after your own game, Maartens,” he said nervously.

“Thank you, little man, but perhaps I prefer to look on at you,” Piet Maartens answered, while his companion gave vent to a sniggering laugh which set Jack’s pulses thumping.

“Then you’ll have to wait a little,” cried Mathews angrily. “I’m going to stay here till you are out of the way.”

“Don’t get angry, my friend,” the Boer answered tauntingly. “Here, this will cool you.” And snatching up a tumbler of iced water which stood on a table near at hand, he deliberately poured it over Mathews, drenching him to the skin.

It was a foolish act and a cowardly one, for Mathews was a head and shoulders shorter than his opponent, and quite incapable of retaliating; and no doubt Piet Maartens had taken this into consideration. But for months and months he had indulged in sneering taunts, and no Englishman had had the temerity to make him answer for them. Not that they always lacked the courage, but it was not policy to fight with a Boer in the Transvaal, and thereby have one’s business prospects ruined. Piet Maartens had traded on this, and also on his height and strength.

Having poured the contents of the tumbler over poor Mathews, he and his companions burst into loud laughter as their victim held his head down and attempted to shake the water off. But a second later they changed their tune.

The sight of such an act of bullying had maddened Jack, and noticing a large glass jug of iced water on another table, he coolly walked over to it, lifted it by the handle, and having reached Piet Maartens’ side, brought it down with a bang on the top of his head, shivering the glass, and drenching him thoroughly. It was tit for tat, and at once a roar of laughter and applause burst from the Englishmen present.

Jack took no notice of it, but stood quietly waiting till Piet had recovered himself. A second later both Boers rushed at him, and struck at him with their cues. One he dodged, and at the same time lunged forward, and struck out so strongly with his fist that Piet’s companion went rolling on the floor. But the other cue fell heavily upon his shoulder, and caused him considerable pain. A moment later he had snatched it out of Piet’s hand, and, breaking it across his knee, clutched the bully by his collar, and belaboured him till he howled for mercy. Then Jack let go, and, standing in front of him, waited to see what would happen, while the Englishmen approached nearer and looked on silently.

“How dare you?” the Boer panted, scowling angrily at Jack. “If it were not that you are only a boy I would break you into pieces. Who asked you to interfere?”

Piet Maartens clenched his fist and, approaching close to Jack, shook it in his face, while his comrade picked himself up from the floor, and looked as if on the point of rushing in again.

But Wilfred at once stood by his friend's side, and the Boer retired to the other side of the room. Meanwhile Jack never moved a step, but, leaning against the table, laughed scornfully.

"Who asked you to ill-treat my friend?" he cried. "He had not injured you, and you deliberately poured a glass of water on his head. For that I gave you a ducking, and when you struck me with your cue I thrashed you with it. Now you threaten to knock me to pieces. Don't let the fact of my age prevent you. I am quite ready."

Jack faced Piet Maartens coolly, and proceeded to divest himself of his coat.

"Now," he said sternly, stepping forward till he was within a foot of Piet, "put up your fists, and I will endeavour to teach you to keep your tongue to yourself, and to be careful in future when you speak of my countrymen."

Jack squared his shoulders, and put himself into a position of defence, while the onlookers cheered him loudly.

But Piet Maartens had had enough. His eyes dropped before Jack's determined gaze, and, muttering a fierce oath, he turned on his heel and left the saloon, followed by his companion.

Jack at once slipped on his coat, and, nodding to all, went out with Wilfred and returned at once to the house.

"By Jove, Jack," exclaimed his friend enthusiastically, "you have done what no one else has been able to accomplish, and I admire your pluck, old chap! But take care of yourself. You have made an enemy of an unscrupulous brute, who will never forget that you have defied him, and made a fool of him. Well, I'm glad you did it; and there is one thing, we shall see less of him at the store. He was always popping in to speak to Father."

That evening Jack recounted the quarrel to Mr Hunter.

"Ah! I am sorry to hear it, Jack, for you have really made an enemy of a dangerous fellow, as Wilfred says," remarked the latter. "But I am glad in other respects, for it will keep him away. It would not be policy for me to send him about his business, but as it is he is not likely to trouble me again. For a long time he has spied upon me here, but with what object I have never been able to discover, though I suspect he is an agent of Kruger's and is suspicious that I have arms concealed on the premises. He really is one of the most uppish of the many bumptious Boers to be met with here and in Pretoria, and of course in other towns in the Transvaal. Everywhere, all over the Transvaal, Englishmen are belittled and sneered at, simply because, years ago, in a fit of generosity we stayed our hands, and would not give them the lesson they deserved. And now we have a very different matter to face. We collectively outnumber them, I believe, but they are all armed, whereas we are forbidden to carry, or even to possess, a weapon of defence. Not only here, but in all the country parts, distrust of us is the rule, and I very much fear things are getting to such a pass that life will become intolerable to Englishmen who are worthy of that name. Once the Boers are openly opposed to us, we shall find ourselves engaged with an enemy nearly every one of whom is a sturdy, weather-hardened fighter, full of pluck and determination, and with a cunning in warfare which will try our troops, should they meet them, far more than is believed. But some day I will tell you all about our troubles. For the present I am glad you showed that fellow that you were by no means afraid of him. He wanted a lesson, and has had it.

"I am going to Kimberley to-morrow, and suggest that you come with me. Matters will have quieted down when you return."

Jack jumped at the offer, for he had heard much of the diamond city, though when he got there he found that "city" was scarcely the term to apply to it. The mines are situated on the western border of the Orange Free State, which lies directly south of the Transvaal, and are about a hundred miles from Bloemfontein.

It was a distinctly disappointing place at first, at least so Jack thought, especially when compared with Johannesburg. But when he and Mr Hunter had made a round of the mines, he was deeply impressed with the work carried on, and with the prosperous condition of everyone in the town. From

Kimberley they returned to Bloemfontein, staying there only a few hours, for, unlike Pretoria, it was of little interest, while at the latter place the huge forts, which had recently been built on most modern lines, were alone well worth a visit.

When they reached Johannesburg again, Jack had been exactly three months in the country, and liked it so much that he determined to stay still longer. His leg was now perfectly strong again, but the accident had been a severe one, and the shock to his system so great that it had brought to light some slight weakness of the lungs, which up to the moment when his thigh had been broken had remained completely unsuspected.

“If you take my advice, my boy,” said Mr Hunter, patting him kindly on the back, one day when Jack had suggested it was time to return home, “you will stay on here for a complete year. We are some thousands of feet above the sea-level, and Johannesburg, and indeed most of the Transvaal, is notoriously healthy. You are not fit to go back to the cold English climate. Of course there is not much the matter with you, but I don’t like that weakness you sometimes complain of. I have written to Dr Hanly and your mother, and the former quite agrees with me that a prolonged stay will do you good.”

“There is nothing I should like better, Mr Hunter,” Jack replied, “but what am I to do with myself all day?”

“Oh, that is easily arranged! You seem to have taken quite kindly to shop life, and I am going to propose that you become one of my regular assistants. I shall only want you in the mornings, and as we always open early you will be able to get plenty of exercise in the open air. You have already made many friends here, and no doubt you will find plenty ready to accompany you on horseback out into the veldt. There are two good horses in the stable which you may use whenever you like.”

Accordingly it was settled, much to Jack’s and Wilfred’s delight, that the former should prolong his visit, and very soon he had quite settled down to the life. Early morning found the two lads in their shirt sleeves outside the store taking down the shutters. By breakfast time everything was dusted and the goods uncovered. After the meal they stood behind their counters, and before long Jack knew as well as anyone in Johannesburg what was the current rate of butter and ham, and what was the lowest figure at which sugar could be sold in order to leave a good margin of profit for his employer.

But there was really no need for the cutting down of prices. A store in such a populous town was a valuable property, and Mr Hunter’s had a reputation which ensured the various departments brisk business all day long. All who patronised it seemed to be in a prosperous way, and indeed only grumbled that all their energies and business prospects were smothered by the continual opposition and stupid action of President Kruger and the Boers.

To say that Jack enjoyed the life he was now leading was to describe his feelings rightly. He took the deepest interest in his work, and after his hours in the shop were done, generally went for a gallop with one or more of the many young fellows he knew. Christmas came and went, and by the early months of the New-Year, the eventful and never-to-be-forgotten year of 1899, he was quite himself again, a rosy-cheeked and manly-looking young fellow whom everyone but Piet Maartens and his Boer sympathisers liked.

So well did Jack’s life agree with him that he was within an ace of deciding to forego his commission in the army and remain for good in Africa. But Mr Hunter dissuaded him.

“You are too young to settle down as yet,” he said. “And besides, it was your father’s wish that you should follow his footsteps and enter the army. Of course we should prefer you to stay, but under the circumstances I hope you will return and go up for that examination. Later on, perhaps, when you have knocked about the world a little more, you may wish to resign your commission, and then if you join us here all the better! You will be older and more ready to settle down, and your family ties in England are not likely to prevent your emigrating if you wish to do so.”

Jack recognised the wisdom of doing as Mr Hunter suggested, and accordingly made all preparations to leave Africa in the following August.

But the old proverb that “Man proposes and God disposes” was exemplified in his case. Events proved too strong for him, and he remained in the country, shoulder to shoulder with his English friends, to face the storm of passion which was soon to burst over their heads, and to take his part in the bitter struggle which was to be fought out between the Boers and their allies, and the sons of our mighty empire.

Chapter Four. A Startling Adventure

“Jack, how would you like to carry out a little piece of business for me?” asked Mr Hunter one morning, extracting a letter from a big bundle which he held in his hand.

“I have just had this offer of leather goods from the agents in Durban, with whom I am in the habit of dealing. In spite of war scares, and the fear that we should have to leave the country suddenly, shoals of new-comers constantly reach us, and such articles as bags and trunks are always in demand by those who are forced to travel from town to town. Saddlery, bits, and reins are also easily disposed of. This would be a good opportunity for you to make a run down to Durban. You have never been there, and you could inspect these goods between the hours when you will be looking round the town.

“There is a list of the articles that have just been shipped over from England, and you will notice that against the prices quoted I have ticked down the amount usually asked for here. If the goods are of first-rate quality, you may close with the agents at once.”

“Thanks! It’s very good of you, and I’d like to go immensely, Mr Hunter,” Jack answered. “How many of each of these items am I to buy? I see you have not stated that.”

“Well, I imagine it is a big consignment, Jack, and I believe by buying now I shall be able to sell all at a large profit, for I think there is likely to be an unprecedented demand very shortly. So I shall leave it to your discretion to buy as many as you think reasonable. Here is a signed cheque. Of course you will get something taken off for a large order, and the terms I shall also leave to you. You have already shown you possess a business head, and I can therefore rely upon your carrying the arrangements out satisfactorily. Fill in the cheque and hand it over when you have settled the matter. To-day is Saturday. You had better start on Monday morning, and I shall expect you back on the Thursday or Friday following.”

Jack was delighted at the confidence placed in him, and set off on the Monday morning in the highest spirits. He purchased a return ticket, shook hands with Wilfred – who would have liked to accompany him, but had to remain behind, as his father was going to Kimberley for a few days, – and jumped into a luxuriously-furnished carriage.

It was a long and monotonous journey to Durban. Many of the towns they passed through, however, bore names which only a few months later were to be in the mouths of all Englishmen, in fact of the whole of the civilised world.

Running south towards the Orange Free State border, the railway curved towards the south-east, passing in succession Heidelberg, Standerton, and Volksrust. Then, with a loud and piercing shriek from the engine whistle, the train dived into a long, dark tunnel in the Drakenberg range of mountains, and emerged into Natal, one of England’s most loyal colonies. Sweeping past Laing’s Nek and Majuba Hill, names which will ever cause our countrymen to grit their teeth with vexation and regret, the train passed through a mountainous and extremely rugged country, and finally pulled up at Newcastle, one of the towns where the opening scenes of the second Boer war were to be laid. Then, after a ten-minute wait, the guard’s whistle sounded, and they steamed on past Glencoe and Dundee, and, swerving to the right away from the neighbourhood of Rorke’s Drift (that little mission station on the banks of the deep, swift-flowing Buffalo River, where a mere handful of English soldiers kept at bay the flower of Cetewayo’s army of fierce Zulus), they ran through Elands Laagte and Reitfontein, and drew up once more, at Ladysmith. On proceeding, the train ran down to the river Tugela, skirted its western bank, and thundered across the bridge, and on past Chieveley and Frere to Estcourt, stopping only when it had run into the station at Pietermaritzburg. From there to Durban was only a short spin, and very soon Jack had arrived, and had been whirled to his hotel on a “rickshaw” drawn by a strapping Kafir.

On the following day he called on the agents, and inspected the leather goods he had been commissioned to buy; and having decided how many to take, and offered a certain sum down for the articles he required, he left the warehouses, promising to call at the same hour next day and hear whether they would accept it or not.

Then he took a “rickshaw” a little way out of the town, and called upon a young fellow who had sailed out from England with him.

“What! Somerton! The fellow with a groggy leg whom the ladies on board took so much care of!” the latter exclaimed, shaking Jack cordially by the hand, and forcing him into a chair on the shady verandah on which the two lads had met.

“Boy! Joko! Do you hear?” he shouted. “Look lively! I’m on the verandah.”

“Coming, Baas! coming!” sounded away from the opposite side of the house, from which a Kafir appeared a moment later, in a desperate hurry to obey his master.

“Now, Somerton,” said Jack’s jovial friend, whose name was Turner, “join me in a lemon-squash and a cigarette. It’s a funny combination, but I find it agrees with me, and I’m sure it’s far better for one than drinking spirits as many fellows do.”

Jack gladly agreed to do so, and soon they were lolling back out of the heat of the sun, puffing their cigarettes, for that was a habit which Jack had already learnt to appreciate, and chatting about their respective doings for the past few months.

“So you’re up in the Transvaal with Mr Hunter, and under the eyes of the Boers, are you?” said Turner, when he had heard how Jack had been employing his time. “Well, I dare say you fellows up there know more about affairs than we do here; but there are going to be ructions, awful ructions, I feel sure, and if I were you I should get ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

“Yes, everyone says the same, Turner,” replied Jack, “and from what I can understand, trouble is certain to follow. Some say it will lead to war, and others say it is likely to be merely a kind of storm in a tea-cup. Whatever happens, though, I expect I shall stick to Johannesburg till the Hunters clear out I’ve thrown in my lot with theirs, and I couldn’t very well leave them, you know. Besides, I am not anxious to do so.

“If matters come to a head before August, then I shall stay in the country and see the trouble through; if not, why, I suppose I shall have to go back to England and begin to cram for the army, a grind which I don’t fancy at all.”

“Then the chances are you will be in the thick of it, Somerton, for by August there will either be war, or old Kruger will have knuckled under. I can tell you this, at any rate: the Boers have been arming for years, and if I were in your shoes I should certainly smuggle in some weapon, a revolver for choice. And mark my words, you’ll have need of it before long or I’m a Dutchman! Now what do you say to a spin round the town or down to the quays?

“Joko! We want a couple of ‘rickshaws’. Bustle up and fetch them!”

Jack and his friend were soon bowling along through the streets of Durban, and spent a pleasant afternoon together.

On the following day Jack called on the agents again, and having come to an agreement with them, and arranged that the goods should be despatched by the train which left for Johannesburg the next morning, he sauntered through the town in the direction of his hotel.

“I wonder whether Turner was right about that revolver!” he suddenly thought, a window full of sporting guns and rifles having caught his eye, and caused him to remember the conversation of the previous day. “If all these Boers are really arming it might come in very handy some day. Yes, I will buy one, with plenty of ammunition, and see whether I cannot hide it away where a pretty close search would not discover it.”

To make up his mind was to act, and within a few minutes Jack was in the gun-shop.

“I want a revolver of some sort,” he said. “Something which would be useful, and at the same time not too big and heavy.”

“Then you couldn’t do better than take one of these Mausers,” the owner of the shop, an Englishman, replied. “They lie much flatter than a revolver, are not given to jamming, and fire ten shots in rapid succession. Come in here, sir, and try one. I have a range specially fitted up.”

Jack followed the man into a big shed behind, and here, for an hour, he practised with various pistole, finally deciding upon a Mauser.

“There will be a run on that weapon soon, sir,” remarked the shopman knowingly, “and if all is true that one hears, or indeed only half one hears, the Boers have been buying a heap of them.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that too,” replied Jack, “and also that they take precious good care that none of the Uitlanders get hold of any.”

“That’s so, sir; but still, I dare say there are many of our countrymen who have managed to smuggle in arms. That Mauser you’ve bought could be easily managed if fixed with a good deal of padding beneath the arm.”

“Ah, I dare say!” Jack answered casually, and then left the shop.

“That was a good idea,” he thought, as he walked back to the hotel, “and I’ll just see how I can manage it.”

Arrived at the hotel, he first begged a reel of cotton, a needle, and a small piece of dark serge from the manageress, and then retired to his room. He was wearing a navy-blue suit at the time, and whipping the coat off, he first fitted the Mauser pistol beneath the waistcoat, pushing the muzzle up till it rested in the right armpit.

“Now, all I have to do is to open the seams down each side and let them out,” he murmured. “Then I will sew on a kind of inner pocket, and as soon as it is finished I must pad the waistcoat all round with cotton-wool. It will make it awfully hot, and I dare say I shall make rather a muddle of it, as I never was very grand at sewing. Still, it’s got to be done, and after all, what does it matter how neat the stitching is?”

It took a good two hours to let out the seams and add the pocket, but at last that part was completed, and he sallied out to buy some cotton-wool.

Then he placed the wooden holster of the Mauser in the pocket, and arranged the wool on either side of it and between it and the waistcoat, securing it by cross stitches. An hour later the other side was similarly padded, and he tried the waistcoat on.

The cotton-wool he found had certainly made all the difference. Both sides beneath his arms were well rounded off, and it would require a good deal more than a casual glance to detect that matters were not as they were meant to be. Then he put on the coat, buttoned it up, and, standing in front of the glass, practised drawing the weapon.

It was wonderful how quickly he could change himself from an unarmed English youth to one with a deadly Mauser, with ten bullets between himself and disaster. To thrust his hand beneath his coat, touch the spring, and unbutton the flap of his hidden pocket was the work of only a moment, and an instant later the pistol had by its own weight slipped out, and the butt was in his grasp, while the holster remained in its old position ready to conceal the weapon again.

Jack practised diligently with and then without the glass, and finally, feeling satisfied that he was now prepared in case of accidents, donned his hat and went out for a walk.

No one suspected him, or looked after him as though they had noticed that he was carrying hidden arms, and even Turner, when he accidentally ran across him, not only failed to perceive that Jack had something beneath his arm, but once more dilated on the possibilities of trouble in the future, and urged him to buy some weapon before returning to Johannesburg.

“You’d better do as I say, old chap,” he said persuasively. “Those Boers are bad ’uns to deal with at any time, but when they are armed and you are not – and they know it too – well, it’s apt to go hard with the poor Uitlander.”

“Ah, well, I fancy I’ll take my chance, or perhaps get a revolver next time I come south to Durban!” answered Jack with a quiet smile. “You see, from all accounts they are awfully suspicious

fellows, and no one can pass into the Transvaal with so much as a cartridge; at least, that's what I have been told."

"Yes, Somerton, there is that difficulty about it," Turner answered, wrinkling his forehead. "Well, I shouldn't think that any Boer would be ass enough to search you. You don't look the sort of fellow to smuggle arms; in fact, if you'll excuse my saying it, old chap, you're about the most innocent-looking and harmless young Englishman of my acquaintance. But I must be going now. So long, old horse, and mind you, if you think of that revolver, or want anything sent up to Johnny's Burg, drop me a line, and I'll get it forwarded to you somehow or other."

The two young fellows shook hands, nodded, and went their different ways, Jack to various shops to carry out sundry small commissions with which Mrs Hunter had entrusted him, and Fred Turner to his office.

On the following morning Jack was whirled to the station on a rickshaw, and, leaping to the ground, paid the Zulu "boy", who, as a matter of fact, was a fine, big, strapping man of about thirty-five, with a long scar down the side of his face, evidently the result of some old assagai stab, but which, curiously enough, served only to make a naturally jovial expression all the more pronounced.

Then he carried his bag, which contained all his purchases, to the train, and placed it on the seat he intended to occupy.

He had arrived a good ten minutes before the time announced for the departure of the Pretoria and Johannesburg express, and employed it in walking up to the engine, which he admired as a very fine specimen of machinery. Then he strolled back along the platform, dodging the passengers, who had now commenced to arrive in large numbers, and finally reached the end of the train. It was rather longer than usual, he noticed, and curiously enough, tacked on to the back of the guard's van there were six trucks open and one closed, five of the former filled with an assortment of wooden cases labelled "Sugar", while the sixth was loaded with a consignment of finely-broken coal.

Having satisfied his curiosity, he returned to his carriage, first ascertaining that the leather goods he had bought for Mr Hunter were on board the train and duly labelled.

Soon the last of the passengers came tearing across to the train, ticket in mouth and a heavy bag in each hand, and he had barely flung open a door and sprung in before the engine gave a loud grunt and they were off.

It was a long run up to the tip of Natal, and the latter part of it somewhat slow and tedious, in spite of occasional snatches of lovely scenery; but at last they reached Newcastle, and pulled up in the station.

"Twenty minutes' wait here, sir," said the guard, putting his head in through the window. "You can get something to eat on the platform if you like."

Jack jumped out at once, bought a bag of buns, and drank a glass of milk. Then he walked out of the station and into the town, thinking he would like to have a glimpse of it. But it was getting dusk, and lights were already appearing. Still, he went for some distance, forgetful of the fact that the minutes were rapidly flying, and that the moment for the departure of his train was getting very close.

Suddenly he looked at his watch, and found with a start that in three minutes it would leave. Darting through the street, he ran towards the station at his fastest pace, only to find, when he reached it, that the outside door was closed and to hear the guard's whistle sounding.

It was an awkward dilemma, but Jack was not to be beaten. Running along towards the front part of the platform, he climbed some rails, crossed a siding full of coal wagons, between which he dived, and rushed up the incline on to the platform only to see the train steaming off. More than half the carriages had already passed him, and the first of the trucks at the tail of the train was abreast of him.

Jack determined not to be beaten, and, calmly judging the time, he grasped the hand-rail in the centre of the last van of all, and swung himself on to the narrow step which was secured along the side. Next moment he was carried on into the darkness without a soul having seen him join the train.

“Well, I caught it after all!” he murmured to himself with an exclamation of satisfaction; “but I shall never be able to hold on here for long. Besides, there’s no saying when I may be jerked off, or smashed against a signal-post. There’s a door along there, and I’ll see whether I cannot open it and get into the van.”

Climbing along the footboard, with his body held as close against the van as possible, he was not long in reaching the door and in wrenching it open. The rest was easy, and in a few moments he was safely inside, with the door closed.

To his surprise he found that there was a dim oil-lamp burning at the end, not that he could see it very well, for a wall of small cases was built between him and it. But, by climbing on to this and peeping over, he was able to see that it was a small lantern slung from the roof, and swinging backwards and forwards and from side to side as the van jerked.

But what was, perhaps, more surprising than all, was to find four men seated on as many boxes in the space that was walled off, playing a game of cards. They were typical Boers; that is to say, three of them were big, bearded men dressed in rough suits and felt hats, whilst the fourth was none other than Piet Maartens, more carefully clothed than his companions, and with a clean-shaven and evil-looking face. Close beside each man was a Mauser rifle and a bandolier full of cartridges.

“Whew!” whistled Jack under his breath, climbing stealthily down. “What are those men doing here, and armed too! What does it mean, I wonder?”

For a few moments he sat on the floor puzzling his brains, and then a suspicion that he had accidentally made a discovery dawned upon him.

“They’re up to no good, those fellows,” he said to himself, “and it looks very much as though they were in charge of this van-load of boxes. I wonder what’s inside them! Let me see. They’re labelled ‘Grapes – to be kept cool’, and are addressed to President Kruger himself.”

Having inspected the outside of the cases, Jack’s suspicions led him to test the weight of one of them, for, like every other Uitlander, he had heard that quantities of ammunition and arms were being secretly imported by the Boers.

“Phew!” he muttered, hurriedly putting it back in its place. “Not grapes, but Mauser cartridges, I’ll be bound. It’s twenty times as heavy as a case of grapes would be.”

There was no doubt now that Jack had hit upon something more than curious, and, having discovered a van loaded presumably with grapes but undoubtedly with Mauser cartridges, and in charge of a party of Boers whilst still in an English colony, his curiosity led him to persevere and probe the matter thoroughly.

“I’ll just see what is at this end now,” he thought, “and if I find the same I shall certainly get out of this as soon as possible. Those fellows would have no hesitation in shooting me to ensure my keeping a silent tongue; and Piet Maartens would certainly help them to get rid of me.”

Jack now crept across the narrow space which had been left opposite the doors of the van, and inspected the end nearest the engine. It, too, was apparently full of cases of grapes, but on climbing along on the top – for the boxes were here several tiers in thickness – he came to another large space left in the centre of them, and on lowering himself into it and feeling about with his hands, discovered no fewer than three Maxim guns jammed close together, whilst beneath them, packed loosely in straw, were piles on piles of rifles, undoubtedly of the Mauser pattern, as he could tell to a certainty by the shape of the breech-lock. Here was a position for a young lad to find himself in! By the merest accident he had managed to get into an extremely dangerous situation, and common sense advised him to quit it at once.

Stealthily climbing out of the hiding-place again, he waited till a sudden roar, as the train ran over a small culvert, gave him an opportunity to open the door and slip out of the van.

Clinging to the rail, he made his way along the footboard, stretched across to the truck in front, and soon had the satisfaction of finding himself sitting on top of a truck-load of fine coal.

But Jack's surprises were not ended by any means, for as he went on all-fours to creep into a safer position, there was a sudden tearing sound, and one leg went deep down through the coal, to be followed instantly by the other. Next moment he was standing on the wooden flooring of the truck, with a layer of coal round his middle, while, strangely enough, his legs were quite free to move about.

Jack was as sharp as most lads of his age, and though he could not exactly see through a brick wall, he could certainly, now that suspicion had sharpened his wits, get to the bottom of this new discovery.

With the greatest care he swept the coal aside till he came to a tarpaulin some five inches beneath it, which was evidently stretched across the truck. Through this he had already forced a hole, and he had soon completely disappeared beneath it, and, nothing daunted by the novelty or danger of the situation, had begun to grope about in the dark. From end to end of the truck he crawled, going over every inch of the space, and when his inspection was finished he had counted two more big guns of some description, besides a vast number of Mauser rifles.

"Ah, this is really serious!" he muttered gravely to himself. "A van-load of grapes, which are really cartridges, for President Kruger, and a truck-load of coal, hiding no end of guns, not to mention those hidden by the cases of grapes. And I suppose the other trucks in front are just the same. I wonder now where they are going to! I'd very much like to find out; but just now, if I want to see the Hunters again, I had better get back to my own carriage."

Jack popped up through the hole again, and was on the point of moving along the top of the coal when, with a shriek and a deafening roar the train dived into the long tunnel which connects Natal and the Transvaal. To attempt to move now would have been to run the chance of having his brains knocked out against the arch above, for the coal-van was one with sides of sheet-iron, built very much higher than those usually seen on our English railways. He therefore lay down flat upon the thin layer of coal, taking good care to spread his weight over as much surface as possible. Five minutes later the train emerged from the tunnel and rushed out into the open. Once more Jack crawled to the side of the truck, and having worked his way to the foremost end of it, clambered over on to the buffer, and from there on to the next truck.

"Now I shall be able to get along far more quickly," he thought. "But first of all I will try the weight of one of these cases labelled 'Sugar'. Ah, I thought as much! this one is so heavy that I can scarcely lift it."

Stumbling along on top of the cases, he tried first one and then another, till he was convinced that here again he had hit upon a large consignment of war material of some sort. For if it was not ammunition, or something of that nature, what could it be? And why should the cases be labelled 'Sugar'? Obviously it was extremely likely that all the trucks were loaded with war material, for otherwise why the secrecy and incorrect labelling?

Satisfied that he had discovered a secret of the Boers, Jack scrambled from truck to truck on his way back to his carriage.

It was by no means easy work, for the train was now rushing along at a rapid pace, swaying from side to side and necessitating great caution, especially when he was stretching across the space which separated the trucks.

However, by dint of due caution he at last reached the foremost truck, and was on the point of lowering himself on to the buffers when his hand struck against a cord which seemed to run from end to end over the middle of the wooden cases. He ran his fingers along it, and was wondering what it could be, when the flash of a light from the open veldt at the side of the line caught his eye. A second later it had been left behind, but the rope in his hand jerked and then stretched tight, as though the flash had been a signal and someone were pulling.

At that moment the train was rushing downhill, and the brakes were applied to steady it. The grinding roar, and the sparks as they gripped the wheels, attracted Jack's attention, while the tension on the cord in his hand became instantly greater. Then there was a succession of loud bangs and heavy

jolts as the buffers of the carriages and trucks came together. Before Jack could so much as guess at the meaning of it all, the cord became suddenly slack, the brakes were clapped on to the wheels of the trucks, almost throwing him over the front with the jerk they caused, and the Johannesburg express was racing away from him into the darkness. For five minutes the trucks followed in the wake of the express, their pace getting every moment less. Then there was a clank and a jar, and they swerved from the main track through a siding behind a station, which was totally unlighted, and on beneath some overhanging trees, and out on to the veldt once more. A couple of hundred yards farther on a big hill loomed up directly in front of them, a large shed appeared in sight, and within five minutes the trucks had run beneath it and on a little way into the hill. Then the brakes bit the steel rims harder, and the whole came to a stop.

Jack had not wasted his time meanwhile. Feeling sure that he had accidentally got into a very dangerous corner, he crouched low upon the cases, and the instant the trucks pulled up, jumped over the side and darted underneath.

“Wie gaat daar?” (who goes there?) he heard someone exclaim, and a big Boer, with an iron-grey beard, appeared, carrying a lantern.

“We are Uitlanders and have brought you a present,” a voice shouted, and then there was a loud chorus of laughter.

Jack thrust his head out from beneath the truck and looked round. As far as he could ascertain from a hasty glance the trucks had come to a standstill in a large vaulted stone chamber, along the sides of which numerous guns of all sizes were packed, while behind them was a solid wall of boxes, similar to those in the truck above his head labelled “Sugar.”

As he looked out, the four men, including Piet Maartens, who had ridden in the van from Durban, stepped down to the ground, and it was one of these, a short stumpy little German, whom he knew well by sight, having seen him frequently in the streets of Johannesburg, who had made the brilliant joke at which his comrades had laughed. Evidently he was more proficient in the English tongue than in the difficult and uncouth language of which the Boer boasts, and as most of the latter who live in the Transvaal towns can speak English more or less perfectly, the conversation which followed was carried on so as to be perfectly intelligible to Jack.

“Well, Hans,” the big man who had first spoken said, addressing the German, “so you have brought Oom Paul’s groceries through quite safely, and without raising the suspicions of those English fools. Ha, ha! ‘Grapes, to be kept cool.’ Tis a fine idea. But it would never do if others than our own men handled them. They are too heavy, my friends, too heavy by far, and so also is the sugar of which his honour is buying such a large amount. It just shows what fools there are in the world, and what money, liberally spent, can do.”

“True, Oom Schalk,” the German answered, with a chuckle, “there are some fools indeed, as you say, and also there are wise men. Oom Paul is the wise man of this land, and he is slim – ah! so slim that no one has yet got the better of him. It was by his order that all this stuff here came through openly, and labelled as it is. It is just the fact that we make no attempt to hide it that ensures its reaching us in safety. Ah, those English! Well, a time is coming, Oom, when we shall teach them something. Bah! How I hate them! The very sight of one makes me ill.”

“Well, well,” Oom Schalk said with a smile, “you shall have a chance to pay them out, my friend. But now, let us see that all the trucks are right, and then we can leave them till the morning.”

Holding the lantern well above his head, and followed by his four comrades, the big Boer looked into the covered van, and then walked along by the side of the trucks, climbing up and inspecting the contents of each.

Now was Jack’s chance to get away, and he took it at once. Scrambling along on the concrete with which the vault was paved, he slowly passed beneath the trucks till he reached the end of the van. Peeping out to make sure that there was no one about, he stole along in the darkness, and soon was out of the vault and in a large shed built against the opening.

There seemed to be no one near, and the only sound was the grating of the feet of those behind him and the faint hum of their voices.

Standing up, he listened for a few moments, and, hearing nothing suspicious, ran across the shed towards the door. It was standing wide open, and at the sight he almost gave a cry of joy. In a moment he was close to it, and was on the point of rushing through when a strong arm clutched him by the collar, while the cold muzzle of a weapon was thrust into his ear.

It was a terrible shock, and set Jack's heart throbbing fiercely. But he had the presence of mind to keep perfectly still, for that cold touch at his ear told him better than so many words that the slightest movement would mean his certain death.

A moment later someone else had grasped him on the other side, and he was marched back into the vault, and dragged before Oom Schalk and his companions.

"What is the matter?" the Boer demanded, placing his lantern close to Jack's face, and scrutinising his features closely. "Why, he is not one of ours! He is a spy!"

"I cannot say who he is or how he came here, Oom," the man who had captured Jack replied; "but as I stood by the door with Van Zyl and watched you as you walked along the trucks, I suddenly caught sight of someone creeping across the vault. His head passed between me and your lantern, and I saw at once that he was not one of you. So we waited here silently in the dark, and caught him as he was about to run through the door."

"Who are you, boy?" Oom Schalk demanded fiercely, staring at Jack's face.

"He's English. He's one of the hated Uitlanders!" shouted Piet Maartens, recognising Jack at this moment. "His name is Somerton, and I tell you, Oom, young though he is, he is as much our enemy as any. He is a spy, and has been sent by Hunter, or probably by the British consul, to watch our movements, so that news may be sent to the English Government."

"A spy, a spy!" shrieked Hans, his fat face becoming livid with fear and rage. "He has seen all, and will betray us, this hated Englishman! Shoot him, Oom, shoot him! No one will know."

"I am not a spy, and I came here because I could not help myself," Jack answered defiantly. "I was late for the train at Newcastle, and only just managed to climb on one of these trucks. Before I could get back to the carnages they were gone, and I was being carried down here. Then, when I found none of my own countrymen with you I naturally tried to get away without being seen."

"And you were not sent by anyone to spy on us?" asked Oom Schalk a little less sternly. "Answer me truly, for if you tell me a lie, as there is a heaven above I will shoot you, so that no one shall ever know what has become of you."

"I am telling you the truth," Jack answered stubbornly. "I can say no more. If you shoot me, you will be committing a foul murder, and will some day regret it bitterly."

"Don't believe him, Oom! Don't believe the dog!" cried Piet Maartens savagely, scowling angrily at Jack. "He lies. I can see it on his face. He is a spy, and we must shoot him."

"Yes, shoot him, shoot him!" chimed in the German. "What does it matter one proud Englishman more or less?"

"Softly, softly, Hans Schloss and Piet Maartens," exclaimed Oom Schalk. "We need not hurry about this matter. The lad is young – no older than my own son – and I will not kill him yet. Wait till to-morrow, and we will learn more about him. All Englishmen are hateful, but I will not take the life of a single one of them unless there be good cause. Remember, my friends, there is but one God above us, and He will judge us for our acts. If this lad is guilty of spying he shall die, but in proper form, for I will not have him murdered. But he has a truthful face, and I am inclined to believe his story, for who would be such a fool, even amongst these Uitlanders, as to spy upon us here? No, no. It is unlikely, and we will wait till to-morrow to learn more about him, and sift the matter properly."

"Bah! You have too soft a heart, Oom Schalk," Hans Schloss shouted. "I say, let us end his spying at once, for if you wait he will manage to escape from us."

“Wait, wait!” exclaimed Oom Schalk, with some show of temper. “You would not be so ready for me to carry out the sentence if you were in his place. To-morrow we will see about the matter, and meanwhile I place the prisoner in your hands. You will be responsible for him, and see that no harm comes to him, or I will show you that Oom Schalk has a stony heart at times.”

The big Boer nodded to Jack, and stalked out of the vault.

For a few moments Jack faced unflinchingly the six men who remained, wondering whether, now that their commandant had gone, they would shoot him or injure him in any way. But with a few muttered oaths and sneering remarks as to what would happen to him on the morrow, they turned away, Piet Maartens giving orders that he should be bound with a rope.

Five minutes later Jack was tied hand and foot, and placed upon the concrete flooring with his back resting against a wheel of one of the trucks. From here he watched his captors, who had retired into the shed. Placing their lanterns on the ground, they wrapped themselves in blankets, and, leaving one of their number seated on a stool, threw themselves down to sleep.

“I’m in a nasty hole,” thought Jack, “a very awkward fix indeed. If it had not been for Oom Schalk those brutes would certainly have shot me; and I’m not at all sure that they won’t do so after all, for there is no one to prove that I am telling the truth. Even if they don’t harm me, they are bound to get rid of me, for they can never allow me to remain in the Transvaal after this. Well, I must get away somehow.”

For half an hour he sat quietly thinking, with his eyes fixed upon the lanterns and upon the figure sitting close to them. The Boer had lit his pipe, but it constantly went out, and he as constantly lifted a lantern to get a light again. Then he put it on the ground, folded his arms, and stared about him. Soon his head drooped, and nodded gently, then his chin went down on his chest with a jerk, and he sat upright again, shrugged his burly shoulders, yawned, and looked about him. Jack watched him with deep interest, and soon saw that he had fallen asleep.

Now was his time, and noiselessly bringing his heels close beneath him, he gave his body a jerk forward by pressing against the truck with the back of his head, and in another moment was standing on his feet.

He was still helpless, for he was firmly bound, with his hands behind his back. But he had not been racking his brains all this time for nothing. He remembered that at Durban he had noticed that the corners of the iron trucks were not turned over, but bolted to angle-irons inside, leaving a more or less rough surface at the edge. It was a small matter, but he had noticed it just as one does take note of trivial points, and he now determined to put it to a good purpose. Inch by inch he shuffled along till he reached the corner of the truck against which he had been placed, then he leant against it, and commenced to rub the cords which bound his wrists up and down the roughened edge.

It was difficult work, but he clenched his teeth and put all his strength into it. After more than half an hour’s nibbing the cord was cut through and his hands were free. To release his legs was now a simple matter, and in a few minutes he was standing close to the truck, with his boots off, and slung across his shoulders by the laces. Then he undid his secret pocket, pressed the spring, and gripped the butt of his Mauser pistol.

At this moment there was a sound from the shed, and on looking in that direction Jack noticed that the sleepy sentry was half-awake once more, and was making a desperate effort to stand upon his feet. He yawned several times, shook himself, rubbed his eyes, and then suddenly turned and looked towards the trucks.

But Jack had expected such a movement, and when the sentry turned, the dim light showed him the prisoner still seated in the same position. Once more his head nodded, and within a few minutes he had dozed off again.

In a moment Jack was on his feet, and was darting across the concrete. A few seconds took him into the hut, and in another moment he was at the door. There was no lock, but it was bolted top and bottom.

He at once commenced to draw the bolts back, and had almost succeeded in opening the door when the sentry woke at the noise, saw his prisoner escaping, and shouted at the top of his voice.

“Stand!” cried Jack sternly, pointing his pistol at the man, as he was in the act of leaning over to reach his rifle.

Quick as lightning he pulled back the last bolt and flung the door open, covering the six men in front of him all the time. Three of these still lay on the ground in their blankets, half-sitting up on their elbows, and as yet scarcely understanding what had happened. Piet Maartens, however, and Hans Schloss the German, had at once jumped to their feet, and as Jack was turning to fly the latter stooped and picked up his rifle. Before he could bring it to his shoulder there was a sharp report, Jack’s weapon flashed vengefully, and the fat little German fell with a scream on the floor, with a Mauser bullet through the calf of his leg. Next moment Jack had darted through the doorway, banged the door to, and hurled a wheel-barrow, which happened to be just outside, across it. Then he turned sharp to the right and ran round the corner of the shed, for common sense told him that to attempt an escape across the open veldt which stretched away in front would be to run the almost certain risk of capture.

As it was, he crouched round the corner of the shed, and, Mauser in hand, watched to see what would happen next.

From the inside he could still hear a succession of piercing shrieks uttered by Hans Schloss, but these were quickly drowned by angry shouts and oaths. There was a loud shuffling of feet, and a moment later the door through which he had just escaped was flung open with a bang, and all the Boers rushed out pell-mell, leaving the German to his own devices.

But the wheel-barrow was yet to be a lesson to them, to teach them that even an English lad must be reckoned with at times. They were all men who had been used to sneering at the “Rooineks” (English) from the time when they were boys, when their fathers had detailed to them how some thousands of Boers had lain in ambush behind the stones on Laing’s Nek, and had destroyed a handful of British soldiers exposed out in the open. But here was a mere lad who had dared to spy upon their movements, and who, after capture, had listened bravely and calmly to the speedy death proposed for him. He had not even whined, or begged for mercy, but had as good as defied them. And now, to add to it all, he had in some manner, totally inexplicable to themselves, severed his bonds and escaped from the vault, wounding one of their number in the process; and had laid, as a kind of parting shot, a trap for them all, which brought the five men suddenly and with a violent crash to the ground, sending their rifles flying in all directions.

It was a bitter lesson, and goaded them to madness. With muttered curses and fierce shouts of rage they leapt to their feet, and, without pausing to think, rushed out into the open veldt, where the sharp reports from their rifles showed that they were firing at imaginary objects which they took to be the fugitive.

Had Jack wished it he could have planted more than one of the bullets from his pistol in the bodies of the Boers as they lay on the ground in the full glare of the lamps from the inside of the shed, but as yet he was by no means proficient with his weapon, and besides, he had no wish to take the life of any one of them, or to injure them in the slightest. All he aimed at was to make good his escape, and no sooner were they out of sight than he darted back towards the steep kopje in the side of which the vault was evidently constructed, and climbed up it, taking care to stoop low, and dodge from boulder to boulder. Soon he was at the top, and here, sheltered behind a breastwork of rock, he stopped and listened.

He could still hear shouting down on the veldt below, and an occasional rifle shot, but these soon ceased, and about half an hour later the five Boers returned and entered the shed, the light from the lamps throwing their figures into strong relief.

“Ah, now I can make a move!” thought Jack, “and the sooner I get away from here the better. After what has happened those fellows would shoot me if they got hold of me.”

At this moment he suddenly remembered that at Newcastle he had stowed his bag of buns away in his pocket. Pulling it out, he finished what was left, for he had an excellent appetite which no amount of adventure could disturb. Then, feeling better, he picked his way down the opposite side of the hill, and, having made a wide *détour*, turned towards the railway, and walked on till he came to it. Then he trudged along by the side of the metals, and in due course reached a small station midway between Volksrust and Standerton.

There was no one about, but the night was beautifully warm, and Jack therefore lay down on the veldt outside the station. Early next morning he walked on to the platform and knocked at the station-master's door.

"Hallo! Who are you?" the latter asked in sleepy surprise, appearing in a half-dressed state, which showed that he had only just got out of bed.

"Oh, I'm one of the English from Johnny's Burg!" Jack answered easily. "I've been staying with some people this way, and started last night to catch the train. But you people don't trouble about sign-posts in these parts, and so I lost my way. Instead of finding my road to Standerton I got out of my reckoning and came down here, where I've spent the last few hours asleep on the veldt. Can you give me something to eat?"

"It's a precious funny story," the station-master, who was a Cape Dutchman, grumbled in reply. "But, then, you Englishmen, fresh from home, do all manner of strange things. Come in, and we'll see what the Tanta has for you. But mind, I can't afford to give you a meal; you must pay for it."

Jack readily agreed, and ate ravenously when at last a dish of smoking biltong was placed before him, for his long march across the veldt had given him a keen appetite again, which his sleep in the open had in no way diminished. Big cups of smoking coffee were also provided, so that altogether he fared very well.

Then he lit a cigarette, paid the amount demanded, and went outside on to the platform, where he and the Dutch station-master walked up and down in friendly converse till the train for Johannesburg arrived.

Four and a half hours later he stepped on to the platform at the big mining city, the Golden City of South Africa, and walked to Mr Hunter's store.

"Back again, Jack! Why, we did not expect you till to-morrow morning!" exclaimed Mr Hunter, shaking him by the hand. "Your bag and the leather goods turned up early this morning, and as you didn't arrive we naturally thought you had decided to stay a day longer and would return by to-night's mail."

"No; I ought to have been back early this morning with the baggage, Mr Hunter," Jack answered; "but as it was, I was delayed just on this side of the Transvaal border, and have had to come on by a local train. I'm afraid it's likely to be rather a serious matter, and as soon as possible I should like you to give me some advice."

"My dear Jack, whatever are you talking about?" exclaimed Mr Hunter in astonishment. "Was there an accident at Volksrust? But no, I know there was not, for I went to meet the train this morning. Whatever made you break your journey? You have no friends in that part of the country that I have heard of."

"I'll tell you all about it if you'll come out on the verandah, Mr Hunter," Jack answered. "I've been on my legs, tramping over the veldt, all night, and I'm feeling a bit done-up and tired. Let us get a couple of chairs out there, and then you can hear all I've got to tell."

A few minutes later Wilfred joined them, and the three settled themselves comfortably on the verandah, where Tom Thumb, Mr Hunter's Zulu "boy", who was the biggest native ever seen in Johannesburg, supplied them with long glasses of deliciously cold lemon-squash.

Chapter Five.

Rise of the Boer Power

“And so you’ve discovered a secret magazine of our friend Paul Kruger, have you, Jack?” exclaimed Mr Hunter when the adventure of the previous night had been narrated to him. “Well, the existence of arms in that part of the country is more than I or any one of us had guessed. That ammunition and guns of all description are pouring into the Transvaal, and have been pouring in for the past three years, there is no doubt. They come openly from Delagoa Bay, and from the south under cover of some other name. Yes, we all know what is going on; but now the fact of there being a big magazine close to the Natal border opens my eyes. I have often heard it said that the Boers are ready to fight for their independence, but would not attack their neighbours till they were compelled to do so. Then I have heard it rumoured, and very often too, that the government at Pretoria has bigger schemes in view.

“Cecil Rhodes has, as is well-known, a strong desire to see a United South Africa under the British flag; and if I make no mistake, Kruger and his underlings are scheming to trample that spotless banner under foot and replace it with the vierkleur. In my opinion they are capable of anything, and I feel positive that a United South Africa under the Boers, with Kruger president of all, and with a population solely composed of Dutch, is aimed at. To oust the British is what they have in view, and for that purpose they are hatching a gigantic conspiracy, the result of which will be a terrible war.”

“But surely, Mr Hunter, they would not dare to attack the English,” Jack interposed. “We are the strongest nation on the face of the earth; so strong, indeed, that no other European race would declare war upon us if an honourable settlement were possible.”

“Ah, Jack! you have learnt a deal since you came to Johnny’s Burg, but not enough yet of Boer ambitions and Boer cunning to be able to say exactly what they would be capable of. For my own part, I believe what I have said. England is face to face with a vast and dangerous conspiracy, and these hardy and resolute Boers will yet prove a thorn in her side. But to return to your adventure. You have certainly escaped from a difficult position, and I congratulate you, my lad, on the pluck and coolness you evidently showed. Had they put you against a wall and shot you immediately you were discovered it would have been only what might have been expected, for you undoubtedly possess a secret of theirs which they have been jealously guarding. Supposing my theory of a war with England is correct, that huge accumulation of war material close to the border would enable them to despatch a force of Boers by train, and post them and the guns on the passes, and upon the mountains which separate us from Natal, within a few hours of the declaration of hostilities. We could not possibly be ready, and instead of our manning every rock and stone, and so preventing their passage into the country, they would pour through the passes in their thousands, and the colony of Natal would be invaded and in the hands of the enemy before our countrymen had had time to recover from the surprise.

“Yes, it is a most important secret, and I fear you will be a marked man. You have already made an enemy of Piet Maartens, and Hans Schloss bears no better reputation than he. And you have wounded him, a fact which he will never forget. But there are the others too. They will have a score against you. Altogether, Jack, I think you will be wise to leave us and get back to England as quickly as you can.”

“You say there will be trouble soon, Mr Hunter?” Jack asked, after a few moments’ silence, during which he considered what he should do in the circumstances.

“Yes, I firmly believe there will be an awful struggle between England and the Boers before many weeks are past,” replied Mr Hunter earnestly.

“Then, if that is the case,” said Jack decisively, “we are likely to get the worst of it for a time, and every man in South Africa will be wanted.”

“That is precisely what I think, Jack. Some, no doubt, would scoff at me as a pessimist. But I speak from some experience and many years’ knowledge of the Boers. England, it is my firm belief, will be aghast at the huge armaments and the large force opposed to her, and she will require every man that can be found able and willing to shoulder a rifle.”

“Then I shall stay, Mr Hunter,” Jack said quietly. “I’ve no great wish to get back to a crammer’s at present. A few months later will do just as well, so I shall wait and see what happens. There is nothing I should like better than to take part in a campaign. Not necessarily against the Boers, for some of them seem good fellows, but in some war alongside of British troops. Meanwhile, if the Transvaal has become too dangerous a place for me to stay in, I can easily run down to Kimberley. A few weeks amongst the mines would be excellent fun.”

“Well, Jack, you must do just as you wish,” answered Mr Hunter. “If you stay in the country, you will do well to go to Kimberley, or one dark night you will be having a bullet flying after you, for the Boers are not apt to stick at trifles. They are men whom it is not well to play with, and the code of honour is not so high amongst them as to prevent their murdering one who possesses a secret likely to endanger their future plans.”

“I should think not, indeed, Father,” chimed in Wilfred. “Look at the mean tricks they played in the last war – firing on white flags and ambulances, and saving their own skins by running away. You have often told me how they treated our soldiers, and everyone here knows how they bully the natives.”

“They are a curious and, I believe, unique race,” replied Mr Hunter; “and if you two lads care to listen I will tell you what little I know about them, and what are the precise difficulties which have led to such friction here between the Boer Government and the Uitlander population.”

“Do, by all means!” both lads cried.

“Well, I will; but first we’ll have another glass of this cool stuff. Tom Thumb!” he shouted. “Here, I want you.”

A moment later the big Zulu appeared, clad in light check trousers and a striped flannel shirt.

“Bring more ‘squashes’ and a cigar,” said Mr Hunter.

“Alright, Baas! I bring him plenty quick,” Tom Thumb replied, turning on his bare heels, and striding noiselessly into the pantry close by, where soon the sound of popping soda-water-bottles told that he was carrying out his master’s orders.

A few minutes later the drink was placed on the arm of each chair, Mr Hunter had lit his cigar, and was leaning back, puffing clouds of smoke from his lips, and staring thoughtfully at the ceiling.

“Light up, boys!” he said at last. “It’s a bit of a yarn, and wants to be followed closely. Now, to start the ball rolling, as it were, I must tell you who and what our neighbours are, and from what race they derive their origin. You must know that the first whites to visit this vast continent of Africa in its southern parts were of Dutch nationality. They were servants of the Dutch East India Company, who placed a colony of their countrymen at Table Bay to form a depot, where vessels could put in and replenish their provisions and water with some degree of safety. They were joined many years after by a band of French Protestants who had been driven from their own country.

“In 1795 the Colony was taken over by the British by request of the Stadtholder of Holland, who had been dethroned. But in seven years’ time we handed the country back again.

“Later on, however, our forces returned once more and ousted the Dutch, setting up a government on the site which is now occupied by Cape Town. Naturally, many of the Dutch and French immigrants had become possessed of property, and had commenced to farm the land; and these stayed on under the new rule. In process of time they intermarried, and by the commencement of this century numbered about 75,000 souls all told. That is the origin of the present Boer nation. They are sprung from the union between Dutch and French settlers, who were the pioneers of Africa.

“Then the British immigrant arrived and sat down by the side of the Boers, and together, in perfect unity and good fellowship, they pushed farther into the country, fighting one long continuous

fight against hordes of natives and against lions and other savage beasts. Every step they advanced had to be fought for; for, just as the Bed Indians in America have persistently resisted the onflow of strangers into their hunting-grounds, so have the natives of South Africa fought to resist the onward progress and invasion of the white settlers into the land which they considered theirs by right of birth.

“But now – to hark back for one moment to that time when England stepped in and took possession of the colony – a factor arose to upset the peace and general agreement of Boer and Briton. The fact that they had been handed over by their own government to the British, like so many sheep, had roused the fiercest anger amongst the Boers. And now this resentment was inflamed by the restraining hand which our government laid upon them with regard to the natives.

“Years before, the Boer settlers had become accustomed to slave labour, and as they pushed on into the country, natives were pressed into their service. And these they had punished as each man considered the case deserved. Probably because there was a plentiful supply of Kafirs and Hottentots our Boer friends had not stopped at whipping the poor fellows. They treated them with absolute brutality, even going to the length of taking their lives.

“Such barbarous doings awoke in England a storm of anger, for, thank God, our country has long been opposed to slavery. Freedom and equality has been our motto for many years, and we have sustained it at no small cost to ourselves.

“When the tales of Boer brutality became known to the folks at home, the indignation it caused resulted in the emancipation of all slaves, and from that date the ‘Baas’, as the master is called, and the native ‘boy’ had equal rights; and to injure one of them was a crime punishable by the same laws as hold good in England.

“You can imagine, my lads, what rage this new arrangement caused in the hearts of the Boers. For years they had been free to do as they chose, and now their slaves were theirs no longer, and the natives, who had been in their masters’ eyes like mere cattle, were now their equals in point of law, and were not to be ill-treated with impunity.

“This was too much for the Dutchmen. The very sight of an Englishman roused their anger and hate, and rather than be forced to live side by side with them and be governed by their laws, they struck out a line for themselves and trekked away north into the unexplored wilds. Taking their wives and children with them, and driving their flocks, they set out for the unknown, seeking isolation from the British, and a country they could call their own.

“Thousands joined in what is known as the ‘Great Trek of 1837’. Some of the more daring of them pushed on as far as the Vaal River, which, of course you know, is the southern boundary of the Transvaal, or South African Republic, as it is called nowadays. They paid dearly for their temerity, for the Zulus came down in swarms against them and massacred every one of them. But the staunch Boer, with his dogged pluck, in which he much resembles our countrymen, was not the man to be deterred by first failures. He pressed on, but in greater numbers and with more caution, and when the Zulus attacked again, beat them off and drove them out of the neighbouring country.

“Others of the Trekkers settled on the Zand River, in what is now the Orange Free State, while others pushed across the veldt, and finally crossed the passes of the Drakenberg Mountains and came to a halt in Natal.

“But these last were also to meet with trouble from the Zulus, for whilst their leaders were bargaining with Dingaan, the chief of that fierce native tribe, they were fallen upon with barbarous ferocity and slaughtered to a man.

“Well, you have often heard it said that when the black man sees blood, no power on earth can keep him in check. That was what happened now. The fierce Zulu warriors had dipped their assagais in the blood of their white foes, and they were not to be held back. Like a wave they burst over the smiling landscape of Natal, and when the tide had ebbed hundreds of hapless men and women had been sent to their last account.

“That was the commencement of all the bitter hate which the Boer of the present day has for the native race.

“I think you have seen, my lads,” proceeded Mr Hunter, “that dogged stubbornness of purpose and undoubted pluck were characteristics of that old Boer people. They never knew when they were beaten, and no amount of danger and hardship would prevent them from pushing on for that promised land which was to be theirs alone, and where they might live in freedom and solitude, with no thought for to-morrow, and with no cares to upset the calm and peace of the life for which they longed.

“They banded themselves together and marched against the treacherous Dingaan, only to be beaten. But again they gathered their forces under the leadership of Andries Pretorius, and on December 16th, 1838, gave the Zulus a tremendous thrashing, killing three thousand of them.

“Then, having settled the natives, they built their farms and appointed from their number certain men who were to form the Volksraad or parliament of their new possessions. But again the British stepped in and intimated that they would not allow an independent state to be formed in the colony. The Boers resisted, and hoisted their flag, but reinforcements were sent up-country, and in May, 1842, the whole of Natal was taken over as a British colony.

“Now, had these hardy pioneers cared to live under British rule, they were free to stay on their farms in Natal. But hatred of all things English was as prominent in their hearts as their enmity for the natives. Britons should not rule them, they swore; nothing but absolute independence would suit them, and so once more they trekked away and joined their brothers on the Zand River.

“One really admires the persistence and pluck of those brave fellows. To an Englishman freedom and independence is a birthright for which he is ever ready to give his life, and to these uneducated Boers interference of any sort was detestable. Brought up in a strictly religious way, the Bible was the only book they ever cared to read. They had no ambition, no wish to rise in the world, and no desire for riches. Give each one a wife and children and a farm right away on the lonely veldt, where he could ride for miles on miles with his gun across his shoulder and never see a house or man, then he was happy. He was independent, could go and come as he liked, and had no cares and worries to destroy his happiness. It was not much to ask for, and had he but acted as our countrymen have always done, his simple, pastoral existence would never have been disturbed. But again ill-treatment of the natives roused the ire of the British Government, and the Queen’s authority was asserted over the whole of the Orange Free State.

“It always strikes me as remarkable that men so devoutly inclined, whose honour and integrity were in those days characteristic of them, and whose private lives were almost always so upright and correct, should still forget that after all a native is but one of God’s creatures, placed in this world to live in happiness. But they could not realise it. The Bible spoke of slavery, and that was good enough for them.

“Well, my boys, we now come to the last trek. England took over the Orange Free State, and the Boers only gave it up after a stern conflict at Boomplaats, in which they were beaten. With Pretorius, their leader, they took their wagons and horses, and pushed on in a northerly direction till they were beyond the 25th degree south latitude. Here they settled once more, and those hardy pioneers, amongst whom I believe was President Kruger, are the oldest white inhabitants of this the South African Republic. At last they were in a country all their own. They chose the members of their Volksraad, and promptly scattered to lay out their farms, and commence that life of simple ease for which their hearts had longed.

“At the same time, too, the English Government handed over the Orange Free State to the settlers there, and the two young Republics started into being, the one with Mr Boshof as president, and the other with Pretorius.

“There you have the history of our neighbours. But before passing on to tell you about the first Boer war, in which I myself took a part, I must mention that the Basutos, who have their country wedged as it were into the Free State, had constant conflicts with the Boers. They are now happy

and contented under our own rule, but they bear an undying hatred for their neighbours which at any time may lead to further troubles.

“And now, my boys, to get to more recent times, that is to say, the past twenty years or so. We have, as I have endeavoured to show you, two Boer republics adjacent to one another, and only sparsely populated. South of them are Cape Colony and Natal, also populated by Dutchmen and blood relations of the Boers, while amongst them are many British settlers.

“I have told you how our neighbours dealt with their native servants. Now that they had been given their independence they were free to do as they liked, save that slavery would not have been permitted. But, to the Boer, native labour is everything. His one aim and object in life is to live at peace with all the world, to possess vast stretches of country which shall be all his own, and in the heart of which he may bury himself away from the world, troubling only to till by means of native servants sufficient land to supply his wants, and devoting himself to the rearing of cattle. His daily routine of life since independence was assured was to rise with the lark, and ride round his lands counting his herds of cattle. That done he was at leisure all the rest of the day. His life was simplicity itself; the gaieties and amusements of cities, and social intercourse with other men, never upset the serenity of his existence. His soul longed to be free of them all. He was at last, and determined to be to his dying day, king of the stretches of plain he owned. No one should oust him from them, and for his happiness it only sufficed that he should live alone with his own family, sit the livelong day upon the stoep (step) of his farmhouse, drinking coffee and smoking incessantly, while he gazed listlessly across the waving grass and veldt, and busied himself with thoughts the nature and depth of which could not be great.

“Dressed in rough cloth coat and trousers, and with a dilapidated slouch hat upon his head, he never troubled to discard his clothing. His beard and hair were seldom trimmed, and his toilet was a matter of which he never thought.

“But all the while, though nothing seemed to stir him from his lazy life, the mere suspicion that his dearly-cherished independence was in danger brought him to tear himself away from his peaceful farm, and, rifle in hand, to place himself shoulder to shoulder with his brother Boer to fight for the Republic.

“For twenty years the Boers maintained a constant succession of disputes as regards the frontiers of the Transvaal. Now it was with the Orange Free State, and at another time with the English. But at last they picked a quarrel with Sekukuni, whose country lies to the northeast of us, and this led to open warfare.

“Now, all along I have given our neighbours credit for staunch and dogged pluck, though I am bound to confess that their constant association with the natives has taught them dishonest and treacherous habits. But to be really brave our friends must lie behind the rocks. It is against their nature to fight when exposed in the open. True guerilla warfare is their motto; to shoot down the enemy unawares, and without showing so much as a finger.

“For defence these tactics are excellent, but for attack quite useless. Sekukuni and his followers proved too much for the Boers. Hidden in caves from which nothing but a frontal attack and absolute disregard of danger could dislodge them, they laughed at our neighbours, who were far too careful of their own safety to make a rush.

“The Boers were forced to retire, but only to face more troubles. To live in idleness and ease is not to make the wherewithal with which to support a government. Their public money ran out, their coffers were empty, and hordes of natives pressed upon their borders.

“In this predicament, when only 12 shillings 6 pence remained to their credit, the British Government stepped in again, for we could not afford to allow the Zulus to become possessed of land close to our colonies, and on April 12th, 1877, Sir Theophilus Shepstone annexed the Transvaal. Troops were despatched against Sekukuni, and he was beaten; and to follow it up, we entered upon hostilities with the Zulus, the hereditary foe of the Boers, and after some terribly trying work, broke

the power of the notorious Cetewayo. Rorke's Drift and Ulundi are names which will never be forgotten at home, and Isandhlwana will for ever be spoken of with bated breath.

“After annexing the country we garrisoned the different towns, and all went well for a time. But, though the better-educated Boers had looked kindly at our government, the ignorant, narrow-minded, and pig-headed peasants thought only of their independence. Once the much-feared Zulus had been crushed, their debts paid, and their finances put in order, they forgot their gratitude to us, and longed to be free again. And, mind you, my boys, they did not shout or brawl about it. They worked sullenly and in secret, as a result of which they determined upon revolt against their English masters.

“They elected a provisional Boer Government, with Kruger, Joubert, and Pretorius at the head, and opened their rebellion by attacking a convoy and escort of our soldiers from Lydenburg to Pretoria at Bronkers Spruit.

“It was a detestable affair. They ordered Colonel Anstruther, who was in command, to halt and turn back. He persisted in obeying his orders, and in a moment, from the hills around, the Boers poured in a terrific fusilade, picking off officers first and men last like so many sheep. The remainder they took prisoners, compelling them to take the places of the slaughtered oxen and drag the wagons to Pretoria.

“To cap all this they foully murdered Captain Elliot, one of two officers to whom they had given permission to leave the country, and whom they drove into the river Vaal when in flood, pouring volleys into them as they struggled in the water.

“And now to tell you of my own part in the affair,” said Mr Hunter. “But first of all, pass me another cigar, Jack, and shout to Tom Thumb for some more of this stuff. It's rather dry work giving you a yarn of this length.”

Tossing away the stump of his old cigar, Mr Hunter carefully selected another, and having lit it and gulped down a few mouthfuls of lemon-squash, he placed his feet on the rail of the verandah, leant back in his comfortable chair, and proceeded with his narrative.

“Wilfred knows all about it, of course,” he commenced, “but I dare say you'll be surprised to hear, Jack, that I was once a soldier of the Queen. That is to say, I was a gunner with my battery in Africa when the Boer troubles first began. I look comfortable and fat enough now, I think you'll agree, and I'm doing as well in the world as I could wish; but the fact remains that I was once a soldier. I had been a reckless and restless lad at home in England, and rather than settle down in trade as a grocer's assistant, I donned the queen's uniform. And let me tell you, my boys, the army is by far the best place for all such youngsters as I was. It's a kind of big school where those who like can climb up the rungs of the ladder, and find themselves, when they go back to civil life, in far better positions than they might otherwise have occupied. It does not matter who or what you were before you 'listed; it's each for himself, and it is the smart, sober lad, who is respectful and knows his work, who gets promotion to the non-commissioned rank.

“But I'm talking of the Boer War. Well, my battery of six guns was sent up into Natal, with about 870 men, mostly of the 58th Regiment and the 60th Rifles, with a few of the 2nd Scots Fusiliers and a Naval Brigade, all under Sir George Pomeroy Colley. We joined hands at Newcastle, some thirty miles south of Laing's Nek, and marched up there on January 26th, forming camp at Mount Prospect, three miles from the slopes of the Drakenberg range, where the Boers were known to be in force.

“Now I am not going to tell you every incident of the engagements we fought. The memory of three successive defeats is too painful, but to make matters clear to you I will just mention each in turn.

“Laing's Nek was the first, and on that fatal day we marched out of camp and up the rugged and zigzag road which leads to the pass of that name. On either side of us some 1500 Boers were posted, and we attacked those on the right. Our gallant boys of the 60th Rifles and the 58th Regiment marched directly against them, whilst we with the guns and the 'tars' with their rockets were posted in the rear. It was a one-sided conflict. We had only stones to fire at, while our poor lads, many of

them, like myself, mere youngsters, were out in the open, without cover of any kind, and wearing white helmets, which were simply a series of bull's-eyes for the enemy.

“I shall never forget that morning. The sun came up over the mountain peaks, making them look like golden pinnacles. Then, passing down the green elopes of the hills, it lit up the valley, with its dusty road, and its little farmhouse nestling on the left at the foot of the steep incline. And there, moving across the grass in regular order, and with the rays flashing from their helmets and rifle-barrels, were our brave fellows, many of them marching to their death.

“Well, well, such things must be, I suppose! England has not done all the glorious acts for which she is famous without a deal of suffering and much loss of life.

“When our troops started up the slopes a perfect hail of lead was poured into their ranks, and every bullet, mind you, was directed by an unseen hand, and by a hand which, backed up by a steady eye, never failed, even from the back of a galloping horse, to bring down the swiftest deer that ever ran.

“But though many of our gallant lads fell, the remainder reached a ridge, fixed bayonets, and prepared to charge. They were met by a murderous fire, which almost decimated them, and the same fate befell a squadron of the 1st Dragoon Guards, who charged the enemy's flank.

“The Boers pressed forward immediately, and we were forced to retire.

“That was the end of that engagement. We sent in a flag of truce in order that we might gather our wounded, who were unmolested by the Boers, save in one instance, when a cowardly ruffian was caught in the act of shooting a helpless soldier, and was promptly bayoneted by one of the injured man's comrades.

“We were now in a pretty tight hole. Surrounded on all sides by the Boers, our supplies were cut off completely. But on February 8th we moved out of camp back towards Newcastle, from which town a convoy was to set out to join us. It never started, but we were ignorant of that, and, pushing forward, crossed the Ingogo River, which runs transversely across that portion of Natal. The guns remained on the other side, and were at once at it hammer and tongs, throwing shrapnel at the Boers, who were strongly posted opposite to us.

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