

Mitford Bertram

Forging the Blades: A Tale of the Zulu Rebellion



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Chapter One. The Tragedy

The river swirled on through the heat, the sweltering, fever-breathing heat. The long, deep reach made but scant murmur, save where the boughs of a luxuriant vegetation dipped on its surface. Above, on either hand, masses of rolling verdure, tall forest trees, undergrowth in rich profusion, and, high up against the blue sky, battlemented rock walls.

Two dark objects relieved the shimmering smoothness of the surface of the reach – two minute dark objects to the ordinary observer, afloat, motionless. Yet why should these remain motionless instead of floating down with the fairly strong, though smooth, current? Well, there might have been, behind each, about twelve feet of ugly, scaly saurian, whose powerful under-water stroke kept them stationary, while watchful, against the descending stream.

A grassy glade slopes down to the bank, tailing away inland into a path something like a “ride” in an English game covert. Great trees, rising overhead, shade this, in a dimness which shuts out, save in a faint network, the glare of the molten sun. And it is at present occupied by two horses and a man.

The horses still have their saddles on, though the girths are loosened. The animals are grazing, their bridles trailing on the ground. Suddenly both throw up their heads and snort, then walk quickly away, further up the forest path. The man, who is standing up, gazing meditatively out upon the river reach, notices this and turns. Then he advances a step or two, and halts suddenly. For there is a movement in the grass a few yards in front, and immediately from this rises the head and neck of a large green mamba.

Instinctively the man’s hand goes to his revolver, then he pauses. The snake is hissing viciously. More of the long neck appears, waving to and fro as though preparing for a spring. This is a peculiarly fierce and aggressive species when disturbed, and the man knows it. He knows also that the chances of being able to stop its rush with a bullet are small. He abandons the firearm and starts another plan.

He begins whistling in a low but peculiarly clear note. The effect is magical. The angry, excited waving of the sinuous neck ceases. The head, still raised, is motionless as though under some new and enthralling influence. Clearly on the part of its owner hostilities are suspended.

He sustains the spell. Tune after tune trills forth in that clear note, and the reptile, its deadly head still raised, its original fury dulled to an almost placid expression, still listens. To the performer the position now seems ridiculous, then rather interesting. He has never set up as a snake-charmer before. For now, indeed, the horror with which the much dreaded reptile had inspired him has given way to a subtle sort of sympathy. He no longer fears it. He seems to have tamed it, and feels accordingly. It is a strange and appropriate picture: the man and the dreaded serpent, the dim shadowing away of the tangled forest, the two horses snuffing with uneasy curiosity in the background, the river reach, still and deep-flowing, with the muzzles of its two voracious denizens causing a light ripple on its surface.

All thought of destruction has faded from the mind of the human actor in this weird performance. He continues to evolve his natural music, even advancing a few steps nearer to his grim listener. The latter shows no sign of fear or resentment. Then an interruption occurs.

Crash! The motionless, uplifted neck of the serpent seems to fly nearly in half, and the great coils beat and burst convulsively in the grass. The man turns. Another man is standing behind him holding a shotgun, one barrel of which is still smoking.

“What the devil did you do that for?” says the first angrily.

The other laughs, a thick sort of laugh, and by no means a pleasant one.

“Do that for?” he echoes, speaking with somewhat of a Jewish tone and accent. “Can’t I shoot a blighted snake without having to ask your leave?”

“You idiot. I was in the thick of a most interesting experiment, and you’ve spoilt it all by your infernal and officious interference.”

“Interesting experiment? I call it disgusting.”

“Here, drop that gun sharp, or I’ll blow your head into the river.”

The Jewish-looking man with the shotgun starts. The other’s revolver is pointing right at his chest, and there is no mistaking the determination in his steely eyes. He knows full well that there is every reason why his life is in mortal peril. So he drops the gun sullenly into the grass.

“Now, then. Take five steps back from it. If you move otherwise you’re dead.”

There is no alternative but to obey, and this the threatened one does.

“Don’t know if you’ve gone mad,” he says. “Fooling with snakes must have sent you off your chump, I reckon.”

“Do you? Well, you chose to fasten yourself on to me for your own purpose – to wit, blackmail. Now you are going to write down, here and now, something which will put it out of your power to try any more blackmail on me for ever.”

“I’ll see you damned first. I’ll see you damned before I write anything.”

“Will you? But you’ll have to wait for that some time – till you’ve had a spell of damnation yourself first. Now, then, are you going to do it?”

“No.”

The pistol cracks. It is a miss. The bullet has grazed the other’s ear. The assailed is standing just on the edge of the bank with his back to the river.

“Don’t move. I’ll give you another chance. I’m aiming lower this time. You’ll get it bang amidships, between wind and water, so to say, and – it’ll hurt more. You were going to stick to me till I came to your price, were you? But you’ve stuck rather too tight.”

“Oh, but – you’ll swing for this,” says the other, between dry, tremulous lips.

“Not much ‘swing.’ Why, nobody will be any the wiser. Not a soul has seen us together. You disappear, that’s all. Well, are you going to do as I tell you? I’ve got everything here – well-filled fountain pen, and paper; strangely out of place in these surroundings, still, here they are.”

The threatened man does not immediately reply. He is calculating his chances, and in a flash it is borne home to him that he has no chances. Opposite him stands a desperate and determined man dictating terms. These he will have to accept, and will feel anything but safe even then; for well he knows that the other has every motive for sending him out of the world.

“Well? Are you going to do it? I’ll count five.”

But hardly has he begun to do so than the situation changes. The man on the river brink suddenly puts his hand behind him, ducking low as he does so, to avoid the shot that simultaneously whizzes over where his chest had been a fraction of a second earlier. A revolver glints in his hand, but he is not quick enough. Before he can get in a shot the other pistol cracks again, this time with effect. He topples heavily into the water.

Yet he is struggling for his chance of life, but a glance is sufficient to show that he can hardly swim a stroke even if unwounded – which he is not. The other points his pistol for a final and decisive shot. But there is something in the wild appealing scream of the drowning wretch that unnerves him, that shatters his callous desperation. And then – the crocodiles.

“Make for this stump,” he shouts, running down the bank. “I’ll give you a hand out. Now I’m going to fire over your head.”

There is nothing now to fire at. The two motionless objects have disappeared, nevertheless he sends a bullet into the water at the place where they had been.

Splashing, kicking, panting, the drowning man makes for the stump indicated. In a moment he will have seized it and the other is running down to help him. A yard further and he will be safe. His hand is already stretched forth to grasp it, when – with a frightful scream of agony and terror he disappears beneath the surface.

The survivor stands on the bank appalled.

“The ‘croc’ have got him, by God!” he exclaims. A moment back and he himself was ready to take this man’s life – for all he knew he had taken it. But the final method of his death is so revolting, so ghastly that he could wish him safe back again. Well, at any rate he had done what he could to save him. It was not his fault if the fool chose to topple into the river. Yet, but for his own compulsion the said “fool” would not have been standing where he was.

He stands gazing down the reach. Is that blood, floating in a dark patch upon the surface lower down? No. Only the light and shade. And now, what to do next?

If the body should be found the bullet wound would tell its own tale. Even then the natives, already in a state of unrest, would be credited with another outrage. But if, as he surmised, the dead man had been pulled under by crocodiles, why then there would be little enough left of him to tell any tale at all. But – what of his horse?

This is something of a problem, and sitting down with his back against a yellowwood-tree he proceeds to think it out. Shall he shoot the animal and leave it there, for its return anywhere without its rider will, of course, raise an alarm? Then an idea strikes him – rather an original and ghastly one. The dead mamba? Its poison glands are intact. Can he not by some means make the dead head bite the living animal? That would look less suspicious than a bullet hole, in the event of the carcass being found. But he doubts whether the venom will inject under the circumstances. No. He must sacrifice the poor brute to his own sense of self-preservation.

The two horses have withdrawn some little way, uneasy at the sound of the firing. Now he lounges quietly towards them, and has no difficulty in securing the bridle rein of both, trailing, as that is, upon the grass. He hitches his own mount to a strong sapling and leads the other to the river bank.

But this is not so easy. The horse, by some instinct, grasps that something is wrong, and demurs to leaving its fellow. At last by dint of patience and coolness it is induced to do so, and is led to an overhanging bank similar to that whence its owner took his last plunge. A quick shot. Four kicking hoofs turn convulsively upwards and the lifeless carcass falls into the deep water with a great splash. The man looks after it for a minute or two as it sinks.

“A pity, but necessary,” he reflects. “Too much cannonading, though. Sure to have been heard.” Then he reseats himself on the grass and lights his pipe.

“This is no murder,” run his reflections. “The fool brought it upon himself. He was given every chance.” Then, as the long period of blackmailing to which the dead man has subjected him comes back, he feels ruthless. Yet the tragedy just enacted seems to have left its mark. He has taken life – human life – and somehow the consideration weighs; in spite of the feeling of relief at having rid himself, and the world, of that most pestilent thing alive – a blackmailer. Should the circumstances leak out he would have to stand his trial for murder – an ugly word. But – how should they? This wild, lonely forest valley, seldom visited even by natives, never by whites, would keep its own secret. And nobody had seen them together.

As he sits there the whole situation seems to get upon his nerves, high-strung as they are after the quick excitement of the foregoing events. The whole atmosphere of the tangled forest, of the deep-flowing river, seems to breathe death. The dank, decaying vegetation, the dimness, the very airlessness of the sweltering valley – all this is not merely heat. It is asphyxia. It is strangely silent too; only the murmur of the river, and that remindful of its voracious denizens, breaks upon the fever-breathing stillness. He shivers, then, as with an effort, starts up, and going over to his horse, he hitches it, straps tighter the girths, and mounted, rides away down the dim, overhung path.

But not until six hours later does he remember that the dead man's shotgun has been left lying just where it was dropped.

Chapter Two. The Mystery

For some time the thought uppermost in the mind of the survivor was that of relief. An incubus had fallen from him; a plague spot that for the last two or three years had been eating into and embittering his life, and rendering its otherwise achieved success null and void.

He did not regret what he had done. He had given the other every chance, and the other had refused to take it. If ever an act of self-defence had been committed it was this one. Self-defence, yes; for sooner or later the dead man's exactions would have culminated in his own ruin and suicide. Even from the physical side of it the other had drawn a weapon upon him. And, in sum, what more loathsome and poisonous animal exists in the world than a blackmailer? This one had richly earned his fate.

That was all very well, but in came another side to the situation. How would the law regard it? Well, he supposed that in this wild, out-of-the-way part things were done of which the law never got wind at all. The country, of course, was within the administration of British jurisprudence, but then, as he had told the slain man, they had not been seen together, and he had done his best to destroy all possibility of the discovery of any *corpus delicti*.

But as he held on through the dark and solemn forest path he grew less elate. The hideous end of the dead man seemed to haunt him, the agony depicted on that livid distorted countenance, the whole seemed to rise up before him again in these gloomy shades. He concentrated his attention on the surroundings, vividly interesting in their wildness and novelty, in their strange denizens, specimens of which in the shape of bird or animal would now and again dash across his way, but still the haunting face was there.

The thing was absurd, he kept saying to himself. Men shot their fellows in battle in defence of their country or of their country's cause, and thought no more about it. Some even bragged of it. Again, in a naval engagement, when a hostile ship was sunk, did not the other side do all it could to rescue the survivors struggling in the water? Well, this was precisely an analogy as regarded his own case, with this difference, that the rescued in the naval engagement had not the power to injure their rescuers further, whereas the man he had slain had, and certainly had the will. Yet, at the last moment, he had honestly attempted to rescue him, at any rate from that horrible fate.

What was this? Had he taken a wrong path in the course of his reflections? For his way seemed suddenly barred. A fallen trunk, massive and rotting with age lay across it, and there seemed no way round it but cutting one through a dense wall of creepers and coarse grass. Even then the path seemed to end.

He dismounted and, hitching his horse to a bough, climbed on to the fallen tree-trunk to reconnoitre. A snake glided off it, hissing, but too rapidly for him to be able to distinguish the species. No, there was no way beyond the trunk. It had evidently been disused since it was blocked, and some other taken. That other way he must have missed, and the only thing to do would be to find it.

Acting upon this idea he remounted and rode back upon his trail. After going some distance it occurred to him that the surroundings were unfamiliar, for he had neglected that safe rule that in travelling on a strange way for the first time, it is well to look back occasionally to accustom oneself to it from the contrary direction for purposes of return; wherein the simile of the "hand to the plough" emphatically does not hold good.

Ah, here it was! He had left the path even as he had thought. Here was the right one. Accordingly he put his horse into it, and then discovered that his said horse was going lame. Carefully he examined all four hoofs. No, there was no stone or anything of the kind.

This was a blank outlook. The still atmosphere of the forest seemed more fever-breathing than ever, and the sky had darkened. A boom of thunder came rolling through the stillness, not so distant either, then a gleam and then another sullen roll. He started. This was no joke. He was in for a sudden storm, and among all these tall tree-trunks too. If only he could reach some native kraal.

But, then, he had heard that the natives were restless, and that it was not altogether safe for one man alone to go among many. He was well armed, certainly, but what is one among many? He had sufficient food for one meal, and a flask. By way of putting a more cheerful light on the situation he took a pull at the latter.

“A beastly place to camp in,” he said to himself, looking around. “Faugh! It simply reeks of fever. If only one could find somewhere more open.”

Now the lightning began to gleam vividly down through the tree-tops, and the thunder crashed in short, angry barks; but no rain had fallen as yet. It was one of those most dangerous storms of all – a *dry* storm. Suddenly a big yellowwood, barely thirty yards off, burst into splinters and sparks as a wreath of flame ran down it into the ground. The thunder-crash that accompanied was awful. The wayfarer’s steed started violently and backed, nearly throwing its rider, then stood stock still, trembling and snorting.

“Oh, blazes, that’s nasty!” growled the latter. “Well, I suppose if one has to go under one has, but I’d rather not just at present. Hullo! what’s that?”

Far a sound had reached him from in front – a sound uncommonly like the barking of dogs. The horse had heard it too, for it pricked up its ears and snuffed the air. By now it was going dead lame.

A few big drops came pattering through the trees, then ceased. The thunder-rolls grew less frequent and less loud. The storm was passing over.

Now the barking of dogs sounded nearer and nearer. Instinctively the wayfarer looked to the cartridges in his revolver, then, replacing the weapon, continued to advance, yet very much on the look-out.

The forest ended abruptly. In front, on a bare ridge or spur, running down from a great height, lay a small kraal, numbering four huts, enclosed within a circular thorn stockade. Beyond it again lay an unbroken mass of forest.

The appearance of the wayfarer in the open was the signal for a rush of dogs from the kraal gate. These were not of the ordinary native greyhound breed, but massive bullet-headed brutes of the Boer mastiff type, and as formidable as wolves. There were three of them, and their savage charge and deep-mouthed baying caused the horseman instinctively to grasp the butt of his revolver. He had no fancy for being pulled from his saddle. On the other hand, if he were to shoot one or all of them, would he not have human enemies to deal with scarcely less formidable? And as though to bear out this idea, three tall, savage-looking Zulus, armed with broad assegais, strode through the gate towards him.

The wayfarer began to think he had got into a bad fix. He had six revolver shots and a rifle bullet, as against three human and three four-footed enemies, and the chances were all in favour of the latter, out in the open like this, and mounted as he was on a lame horse. But the natives began by calling off the dogs, which was reassuring; yet they seemed to be barring his way, while talking to him volubly. Here again he was in a quandary, for except for a word or two of ordinary use he could understand no Zulu. There was one argument, however, which he judged to appeal to all mankind, wherefore he produced a capacious tobacco pouch.

But even that met with no response. The demeanour of the trio was the reverse of friendly, and behind them the three great, evil-looking brutes were stalking up and down, their hackles raised, and muttering and growling, as though impatient for the word to spring upon the stranger. Then after a consultation among themselves, one of the men turned and went into the kraal again.

The wayfarer was nonplussed. It was obvious that they were incapable of understanding each other, for even to signs they seemed impervious.

At last, however, the other man reappeared, and made it apparent, by very unmistakable signs, that he should dismount and enter.

This he accordingly did, trying not to show the while that he was keenly on his guard against treachery. They signed him to a hut, that he should enter it. He crept through the low door way. The interior was dark after the daylight outside, and he took a minute or two to get accustomed to the semi-gloom. Then he realised that the place contained one man, and he a European.

He was squatted on the floor, native fashion, smoking a pipe. He was an old man apparently, for his hair and thick beard were white, yet the face somehow did not seem quite to correspond. It looked younger, but there was an expression in it which was very curious, one of mingled melancholy and malevolence, at least so decided the stranger. But no word or movement of welcome did he make towards the latter, who, perforce, had to open the conversation.

“Well, this is very jolly,” he began, “stumbling upon a white man. The fact is I can’t talk the lingo, and couldn’t ask the way for one thing.”

“Where are you bound for?”

The voice, dead, dull, expressionless, was peculiar. But it was a refined voice.

“I wanted first to get to Ezulwini.”

“You were going in exactly the contrary direction, that’s all.”

The other started. Had this mysterious personage been aware of his progress all along? he wondered. The thought was rather disquieting under all the circumstances. The man was a puzzle. He seemed to prefer his unexpected guest’s room to his company.

“My horse has gone dead lame,” went on the latter. “He may be all right in the morning. But, meanwhile, I shall have to throw myself upon your hospitality, or camp outside in the veldt.”

The other was silent for a moment. Then he said —

“You are welcome – on one condition.”

“And that?”

“That you pledge me your word of honour – you are a gentleman, I see, and will keep it – that you mention no word to any living soul, under any circumstances whatever, that you have been here, or, in short, that you have ever seen me in your life.”

“Well, of course I will, if you wish it,” answered the traveller, very much mystified.

“But I do wish it,” was the reply, given with some fierceness. “And you will do it. Do you know that at a word from me you would never leave this place alive? You would simply disappear.”

Substantially the very words he had uttered to that other, who *had* disappeared. There was a creepy suggestiveness about it all that made him feel more than uncomfortable.

“You needn’t threaten me,” he rejoined, rather shortly. “If I pass you my word, as you yourself have just said, I shall keep it.”

“I know you will. And let me tell you that if you had been as some others I know you would not be here at all. In fact, although you have exactly seven bullets at your immediate disposal your friends would never have seen or heard of you again.”

The mystery deepened. The new arrival was conscious of a very uncanny, not to say awe-inspiring effect in the piercing, unfriendly glance from the other’s eyes. The day had been a pretty eventful one and no mistake.

“Look here,” he answered, in a burst of frankness. “This world’s a devilish rum place, and I’ve lived long enough in it, and seen enough devilish rum sides of it, to have learnt enough to respect other people’s secrets. So you may rely upon me when I give you the full undertaking you ask for.”

The other nodded, then uttered a loud hail, in response whereto a native boy appeared, and having received a laconic direction soon reappeared, together with a large bowl of native beer.

“This is the best I can offer you. I don’t know if you’ve ever tried it, but it’s rather good, always provided it’s fresh.”

“Yes, I have once. Thanks awfully. Well, here’s luck.”

The effect on the wayfarer of this homely interchange of good-fellowship was that it seemed to put him and his strange and rather sinister host on a better footing. He took a big drink of the refreshing brew and set down the bowl. Then he lighted his pipe.

He was almost growing confidential under the influence of rest and refreshment. But it occurred to him that this strange being was unusually reticent. For instance, he had not even asked him his name or where he was from, or indeed anything. So taking his cue he confined himself to generalities, and, except that the other was rather laconic, some conversation became possible.

Finally supper appeared, in the shape of grilled beef on a woven grass mat, together with some roasted mealies, and a renewed supply of *tywala*. The new arrival did full justice to this, then suggested going to see after his horse.

“Oh, your horse is being well taken care of,” answered his host. “However, come and see for yourself.”

As they stood up outside the stranger noticed that his host was a tall man, who, notwithstanding his apparent age, walked without a droop. At a word from him the three big dogs, which had sprung up from somewhere with a growl, slunk back again into silence. The horse was tied to a pole inside the fence, and had evidently been eating his fill of mealies.

“You’d better turn in in my hut. You’ll find it a trifle more comfortable, perhaps, than turning in with one of the Zulus, and there’s no spare hut.”

“Why, thanks awfully. Of course I shall,” was the hearty response.

The stranger woke early, and all the events of the previous day came back upon him. He was rid of an incubus, for which now, in the clear broad light of a cloudless and sparkling day he felt unfeignedly thankful, but his eccentric host – where was he? The mat on which he had slept was unoccupied. Oh, well! The other had got up earlier, that was all. He would follow suit.

Outside he found his host, in converse with a Zulu, not one of the three men who had met him on his arrival.

“Good-morning. I wonder how my horse is to-day,” he said.

“He’s about all right. I’ve had him led up and down, and he doesn’t seem to show any limp. I’ll send a man to guide you over the most difficult part of the way after breakfast. You needn’t mistrust him, it’s sufficient that you have been my guest.”

It was all that the wayfarer could do to refrain from asking for his host’s identity, but something kept him from doing so; possibly he bore in mind that his said host had refrained from questioning him as to his. They talked on commonplaces. But after breakfast, when his horse was saddled up and the guide stood waiting, his entertainer said —

“You didn’t lose this yesterday, did you?” exhibiting a double-barrelled shotgun.

He was conscious of a slight paling, but hoped it had not been observed. Yet at the same time he was perfectly certain it had.

“No,” he answered.

“Ah, well. Then I’d better take charge of it until the owner turns up. And, remember, you have given me your word.” And the straight, piercing, compelling glance seemed to scorch.

“Why, of course I have, and you may rely upon my keeping it. Many thanks for your opportune hospitality. Good-bye.”

The hand which he had put forth was taken coldly, almost limply.

“Good-bye,” was the listless answer; the speaker turning away immediately, almost abruptly.

Chapter Three.

The Girl

The girl sang softly to herself as she worked. The said work was of the homeliest nature, being, in fact, the making of bread.

She looked up suddenly. A ray of the sun, coming round the angle of the house, had struck warm warning upon her uncovered head. Picking up the table on which were the implements of her occupation, she shifted it well into the shade. This involved no sort of an effort. Then, standing erect, she gazed forth upon the rolling waves of veldt which fell away in front.

She was a splendid specimen of womanhood: tall and square-shouldered, and built on generous lines, and if she had just missed being beautiful she was endowed with what was better – a rare power of attractiveness. She had clear hazel eyes, heavily lashed, and when these spoke, together with the smile which displayed the strong white teeth, the face would light up in a way that was dangerously irresistible.

Out on the sunlit expanse in front nothing moved, unless an odd thread of smoke mounting lazily from two or three kraals could be counted. At the back broken ground ran immediately up, in the shape of a dark kloof, bushy and rock hung, cleaving the heart of a mountain range, whose crags and krantzes soared skyward above. Below stood Ben Halse's trading establishment, consisting of three or four native huts, a waggon shed, and two quite unpicturesque buildings of corrugated iron. One of these was used as a dwelling-house and store, the other as a stable, and in the shade of the former the girl was working. And she was Ben Halse's only daughter.

A lonely position this, for a girl, away in one of the wildest parts of Zululand. But Verna Halse never felt lonely. She was always busy, for she was her father's right hand, and no single detail of any branch of his somewhat ramificatory business was unknown to her. Moreover, she had interests, the nature of some of which we shall see into anon. And she was healthy in mind and body, and utterly unspoiled. As for the potentiality of danger attaching to the situation Verna would have broken into one of her frank, winning laughs if anybody had suggested such a thing. She knew abundantly how to take care of herself.

Now she called to a native servant, and bidding him go to the store and fetch another pannikin of flour, her thoughts reverted to her absent father.

"He'll enjoy this, all hot," she said to herself. "I'll make some of it into *roster-koekjes* on the gridiron, Ah, there he is!"

But with the clink of stones a little way off arose the sound of native voices, deep-toned, sonorous. It was only some wandering Zulus, after all. Yet it was time he was back.

Three Zulus came into sight, filing along the narrow path which led past the store. Two saluted and passed on, while he who walked foremost came leisurely up, and, halting, gave the girl greeting in a pleasant voice. He was a magnificent sample of his race. Well over six feet, and built in proportion, he stood erect as a palm-tree, with a perfectly natural, because unconscious, dignity of mien and movement. Even from a European standpoint the man was extremely handsome, the high, intellectual forehead, and the lustrous clear eyes, with their frank, straight glance, giving to the well-formed face an air of composure and reliability. His skin was of a rich red copper colour, which rendered his short, pointed beard and the ring which crowned his shaven head the more jetty in contrast. For attire, besides the *mútya*, or kilt of catskins and hide, an ample kaross of dressed leopard skin was flung round him in graceful folds. It might have been noticeable that, unlike nearly all of his countrymen up to date, he wore no trace of European clothing or ornament.

"Where is U' Ben?" began the Zulu. This was Ben Halse's name among them, being, of course, an adaptation of his Christian name.

She told him, and then went on to talk – and she spoke the Zulu language fluently. This man, whose name was Sapazani, was the chief of one of the powerful septs which went to make up the Zulu nation, and which occupied the adjoining mountain fastnesses. He was on very friendly terms with Ben Halse, a fact which might yet stand the latter in good stead, for the secret heart of the nation was seething with unrest, although long since under British rule. Further, it ensured him the monopoly of a roaring trade.

“What is the news?” asked the chief at last.

“News?” echoed Verna, flashing at him a bright glance of merriment. “Now what, I would ask, could have happened here that a great chief such as Sapazani would care to hear about?”

“That I know not, unless that it came from the lips of *Izibu*,” he answered, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

It is not as a rule respectful for a native to address the superior white by his or her nickname. But “*Izibu*” – meaning water-lily – Verna considered rather pretty and poetic, and did not discourage its use. Moreover, she had been accustomed to natives all her life, and understood them thoroughly. She appreciated, too, the position of her father and herself among this once kingly race, where they dwelt in perfect security as to person and property, so much so that they never troubled to put a lock on anything, not even on the trading store. Now she laughed gaily at the compliment which had accompanied the use of the name, and went on chatting, easily, merrily, even banteringly – that to any one unaware of the stern and rigid line of demarcation in such matters, between white and coloured, which has ever saturated public opinion throughout South Africa, it might have seemed that she was carrying on a sort of mild flirtation with this splendid savage. The latter had produced his snuff-box, and was absorbing a portion of its contents in grave silence.

“But I am forgetting!” exclaimed Verna. “The day is hot, and a visitor must not go away without food and drink.”

“Why, as to the last it will be good,” answered the chief, with a sparkle in his fine eyes. “For the first, I am not hungry.”

Herein again in this detail the man differed from his up-to-date countryman, who will seldom, if ever, refuse anything offered.

Verna rose and went into the house, returning with a large bottle of the excellent ale they brew in Maritzburg, and a long glass.

“Good!” exclaimed the guest, as he drained the foaming brew. “*Wou!* Our people cannot make such *tywala* as this.” The while he had been noting, with calm approval, every movement of the girl: the fine erectness of her carriage, the firm walk, straight from the hips. As he talked he noted, too, the quick movements of her floury hands and arms, for she had resumed her occupation. At last he rose to take leave. The sun was getting low, he said, and he had still far to travel.

“Wait,” said the girl. Then she walked round to the store, returning immediately with a few unconsidered trifles, such as a large sheath-knife and belt, a packet of snuff and some brass buttons, also strings of beads.

“This is something that even a chief may find useful,” she said, handing him the knife, which he accepted with a pleasant murmur of thanks. “These,” she went on, handing him the smaller things, “will please Nonente and Malima,” naming two of Sapazani’s youngest and favourite wives.

These, too, he took. Verna, putting up both hands to adjust the pins in the large and rather untidy knot of brown hair at the back of her well-shaped head, stood contemplating him with a flash of roguish mischief in her eyes; the joke being that she was morally compelling so great a chief as Sapazani to carry something, however small, for a couple of mere women. But she reckoned without that potentate’s power of resource.

“Ho, Samhlu!” he called to the stable boy, who was passing, and now turned hurriedly, obsequiously.

“Thou wilt bear these behind me,” said Sapazani, handing him the other things. Then, unconcernedly belting the knife round his own exalted person, he took a pleasant farewell of his very attractive entertainer, and, followed by the boy, who was one of his own people, strode away over the veldt.

Verna, looking after him, laughed to herself. Her guest had not merely – and readily – cut the knot of his own dilemma, but had turned the tables on her by depriving her of the services of her boy for the rest of the day. But she thoroughly enjoyed the joke. Soon the tramp of hoofs struck upon her ear, and she turned with a smile of welcome to meet her father.

“Well, girlie, and what have you been doing with yourself? Busy as usual?” sung out the latter, as he swung himself from his horse and shouted for the boy.

“Yes; bread-making. But it’s no use calling Samhlu, dear. You won’t see him again to-day, because he’s gone with Sapazani to carry five strings of beads and a couple of dozen brass buttons, which that debilitated weakling was too feeble to carry himself.”

“Sapazani? Has he been here, then? Pity I missed him.”

“Just gone.” And then she told him about her little bit of innocent mischief, at which the trader threw back his head and roared with laughter.

“You mustn’t play tricks on these big swells, darling,” he said, proceeding to do his own off-saddling. “But Sapazani’s a real good ’un, bang the opposite of his crusty, slippery old father.”

Ben Halse was a tall, fine-looking man, with a large beard; just the sort of man to command the respect of savages; in his dealings with whom he was invariably straight and reliable. But as a setoff against this there were stories about him – stories of shady transactions in the gun-running and liquor-smuggling line, and those in charge of the administration of the country held him in no very favourable regard. Indeed, it was whispered that there was one even darker count against him, which, though a thing of a tolerably remote past, the law might take cognisance of even yet. But all these things, although known to Verna, made no difference in the affection and confidence which existed between the two. Of her – his only child – he was inordinately fond and proud; and, so far as he was concerned, desired nothing more to complete his happiness in life.

But she? In the full vitality of her splendid youth, was she not bound to “pair”? This was a question he frequently asked himself, and – it needed no answer.

Chapter Four. The Trading Store

Ben Halse's store was full of native women, some with babies and some without; and all were chattering. Two or three had come there to do a deal, and the rest had come to see them do it.

"*Au!* but this is not the right kind," muttered one, with a dissatisfied shake of the head, holding up a blue skirt; the others joining critically in its examination. "I want one red and striped, not spotted like this."

"Here it is, then," cheerfully returned Verna, producing another. She was presiding goddess on this occasion, as indeed she often was.

But the other, although red and striped, did not seem to please. It was examined critically by the whole committee, except one or two, who, squatted on the floor, were giving undivided attention and, incidentally, nutriment to their infants. The stripes were white instead of yellow, and they ought to be yellow. No white things were worn now.

Verna laughed good-humouredly. She knew her customers. No deal was ever effected with such without seemingly endless discussion – and objections.

"No white things!" she echoed. "Why, *I* wear white things."

"*Inkosikazi!*"

"Well, why not you?"

"*Au!*" and the intending buyer brought a hand to her mouth with a smothered laugh. "*Inkosikazi* does not belong to the chief."

"The chief. What chief?"

"U' Sapazani."

"Sapazani?" rejoined Verna. "But he does not like the clothing of white people at all. Yet you are buying it."

This was a fact. Though on terms of friendship with Ben Halse Sapazani was anything but fond of the trader's compatriots, and discouraged as far as he could the introduction of European customs and clothing. With the latter, in consequence, the store was but scantily supplied.

"It is for wear in the towns, *Nkosikazi*," was the answer, and then after some haggling the deal was completed. Then others came forward. Some wanted one thing, some another, but all haggled. Verna, of course, was used to this. It was all in the day's work, and took up some time. The deal completed, the buyers went outside to talk it over. Two young men came in next. One wanted a sheath-knife and one a green blanket. These were paid for without haggling, Verna throwing in a length of roll tobacco by way of a *bonsela*, or gift to seal the bargain.

The interior of the up-to-date trading store in Zululand presents a very different appearance to the old-time one. There are the knives, and strings of beads, and three-legged cooking-pots, and tobacco of the old days; but there is also a large and varied assortment of European clothing – male and female – the latter preponderating in quantity and degrees of gorgeousness. Umbrellas, too, and looking-glasses, even boots, form no unimportant items in the general "notions" displayed. This particular store, however, did less trade in such things than most; and the reason may be found in the dialogue set forward above. Sapazani, the powerful chief of that section, was the most conservative of Zulus, and discouraged any sort of aping of European ways. But if Ben Halse's trade suffered in this respect it more than gained in others.

Now Verna, for all her attractiveness, was a shrewd and practical young woman, and assisted her father materially in the management of his trade. He did more than a little cattle raising and cattle jobbing, and thus had his hands more free than would otherwise have been the case. In fact, it was a prevalent idea among the people that they could always get more favourable terms in the inevitable

haggle when “U’ Ben” happened to be presiding at the receipt of custom than when the same held good of his daughter.

By the way, there was a curious jagged hole in the thin plank lining of the corrugated iron wall of the room, about a yard to the right of the door and less than twice that measure from the ground, and its history was this: One day a Zulu had come in to buy things. He was a big man and unringed, and hailed from the other end of the country. Moreover, he had been away working at Johannesburg and so had lost much of his inherent awe of the white man, and still more of the white woman. This fellow’s demeanour, at first bold and off-hand, became insolent, even threatening. Verna was alone, and he knew it.

He flung down a pair of boots that he was haggling over, flung it violently onto the counter, so that one of the pair almost hit her, using the while loud and violent language. But he was out of his reckoning.

There crashed forth a loud report, and with a whizz and a scatter of splinters the bullet pierced the wall planking, but so near that the aggressive ruffian felt the breath of it on his arm.

“That for a warning, *ishinga*,” (rascal), said the girl. “The next carries death.”

The startled savage stood as though petrified. He stared at the tall, fine, commanding figure. He took in every detail – the compression of the lips, the hard glint in the dilated eyes, the uncommonly dangerous-looking “bull-dog” revolver, held in a firm grip without a tremor, and pointing direct at his chest. Then he uttered a single word – subdued, respectful —

“*Inkosikazi!*”

Verna looked him steadily in the face for a moment. Then she said —

“Now go. Go, do you hear, before I change my mind. People who insult me are not safe. Go.”
And he went.

Some time afterwards she mentioned the incident to Sapazani, quite in a light, casual way. The chief was strangely angry, far more so than the occasion seemed to warrant, she had thought, with a mild, passing astonishment.

“I would I had known of this at the time, Izibu,” he had said. “That *ishinga* might have found some difficulty in returning to his own part of the country. He is not one of our own people, he belongs to Induba. But those coast dwellers —*Hau!* They are only half men. All the *man* is burnt out of them among the sugar canes and the fever.” Then, with bitterness, “But what is a chief in these days? *I* am no chief. Every white man is chief now, if he is sent by Government – every white *boy*, rather. There are no chiefs left in the land of Zulu. Even those of our people who act as dogs to the courts of the white magistrates think they are chiefs over us. *Hau!*”

And Verna had answered consolingly —

“No one, in all the land of Zulu – white or not – could mistake Sapazani for anything but a chief.”

Now, her customers having retired outside, and there being no sign of others arriving, Verna betook herself outside too. The rich glow of sunshine filled the air, seeming to envelop the fine form of this splendid daughter of the wilderness in its sensuous embrace. She stood for a moment gazing forth – her clear eyes dilating upon the glories of the far-spreading landscape. Then her glance rested upon her father, who, seated under a tree a little way distant, was engaged in apparently earnest converse with a single Zulu.

The latter she recognised as one Undhlawafa, a man she knew well, and the favourite and trusted induna of Sapazani. What were they talking about? she wondered. Well, whatever it was she would not interrupt them, so she passed on into the dwelling-house.

Undhlawafa, who up till then had been talking preliminary commonplace, half turned to make sure she was safely out of earshot. Then he went on to expatiate on a very large koodoo bull that was always to be met with of late in the same haunts down yonder in the Lumisana forest. And now the

moon was nearly at full. Horns? Such horns, went on Undhlawafa. *Whau!* Horns of such a size had never been seen. His listener was vividly interested.

The matter touched Ben Halse on two points of his character – love of sport, and love of money-making. For the first, he, an old up-country man, resented the restrictions as to the killing of game that had come in with the British occupation of Zululand. These were all very well up to a certain point, but when it came to being obliged to obtain a magisterial permit to kill one head of anything in particular, why, then it became a bit chafing. It was one thing to restrict big shooting-parties from outside coming in and slaughtering everything indiscriminately, but to prohibit an old pioneer like himself from shooting a buck of any sort when he wanted to, was another. Prohibition or not, however, many a head of game did fall at the full of the moon, when Ben Halse chose to take the war-path; and every such head would have entailed upon him a ruinous fine did the circumstance come to the ears of the authorities, together with sufficient evidence to support a prosecution. Well, as to that, he took chances, as he had done all his life with regard to everything. One thing was certain – none of the natives would give him away, and there were no whites in the neighbourhood within a long distance. Now and again a patrol of mounted police would pass that way, but he would always be informed of the approach of such at least half-a-dozen hours before its arrival. Then, when it did arrive, why, Ben Halse's hospitality was a household word among the Field Force division of that useful corps, the Natal Police.

So much for the first. But for the second, wherein did the love of money-making come? In this way: The trader was in touch with a wealthy and enthusiastic collector of every kind of natural history specimen. The latter was resident in England, and would pay almost any price for a record specimen of anything, and in this way Ben Halse had made quite a little income. Now the horns of this koodoo, as described by Undhlawafa, and even allowing for native exaggeration, sounded like a very "record" pair indeed. It would fetch a long price, apart from the fun of a bit of night-poaching, which last appealed to the adventurous side of the old pioneer. But not out of sheer love of money for its own sake did the latter never let slip an opportunity of making it. No; it was on Verna's account, and up till now he had done very well indeed. So Ben Halse and the induna agreed to stalk the big koodoo bull with the "record" horns on the following night.

Then Undhlawafa began to talk about other things. He had produced a sovereign and was playing with it. The round gold which the whites had brought them was good, he said presently. Every one desired it, white or black. There was a spot down in the Lumisana forest where twenty times ten of such pieces were hidden. They were, in fact, hidden there for U' Ben to take out when he pleased – upon certain conditions.

Upon certain conditions! Yes. Two hundred sovereigns made up a very comfortable haul. There were two or three packages, the Zulu went on to explain, that U' Ben was required to bring from a certain quarter for Sapazani and one other. U' Ben had a waggon, and he had ridden loads for them before. Had he not always been paid promptly and well? And the trader answered unhesitatingly that he had. Yet he seemed in no hurry to close with the offer. The other, as the way of his race is, manifested no impatience.

"The money is there. It can be taken before anything is done," went on Undhlawafa. "U' Ben's word is as certain as that the sun will rise. The conditions will be fulfilled."

We have said that Ben Halse's record was not quite clear; that there were dark hints whispered against him with regard to liquor-smuggling and gun-running. As for the latter, whatever had been done in that line had been done during the civil war in the country what time the Usutu party and Sibepu were striving for the mastery. In common with all others of his class and tradition, and with many others besides, he held that if the natives chose to get up a fight among themselves that was their look-out, and, in fact, so much the better, in that it would serve the dual purpose of keeping down their numbers, and giving them the opportunity of letting loose the spirit of Donnybrook upon *each other*; wherefore if they wanted firearms for that purpose he had no scruple in supplying the

side that would pay the highest price. Now, however, the case was different. Undhlawafa's "dark" talking was clear enough to him. Such a bribe as two hundred pounds could only mean one thing, and that was not liquor-smuggling.

"The load is there," went on the Zulu. "It is only for bringing it in – the price. Is it not high enough?"

Still Ben Halse did not reply. Yes, the circumstances now were different. The country was now fairly populated with whites, among them hundreds of women and children. All of these he knew were virtually sitting on the crater of a volcano, and he had often said so, only to be derided as a scaremonger. He, however, knew that sooner or later the eruption would take place.

As Undhlawafa had said, this man's word was as certain as that the sun would rise; and this held good equally among white and black. But when it came to a question of making money – though never known to go back upon his word – Ben Halse was not scrupulous as to how he made it. In dealing with natives of authority or position, or both, and, indeed, with many others, he had found them absolutely reliable. He knew now that were he to demand double the price of the service asked of him he would almost certainly receive it; yet he was in no hurry to close with the offer. The induna, the while, sat placidly taking snuff. Then Verna's clear voice was heard.

"Father, come along in. The dinner will be spoiled."

"We will go after that big koodoo bull to-night, Undhlawafa," he said, rising to go inside.

"*Nkose!*"

"Whatever have you and old Undhlawafa been yarning about all this time, dear?" asked Verna, as they sat at table.

"He says there's a thundering big koodoo bull down in the Lumisana, one with record horns. We are going after him to-night."

Verna half started from her chair and her eyes sparkled.

"What fun! Why, so we will."

"Hallo! *We!* Now my 'we' didn't include a girl."

"No? It included this girl, though," was the tranquil reply.

"Did it? I've only got one girl, and I'm not going to have her breaking her neck over stones, or scratching her eyes out in the dark, in that infernal tangle, or getting bitten by some beastly black mamba, or something of that sort."

Verna's eyes danced.

"Since when have you discovered that I was made of sugar, dear?" she said sweetly. "I've never been into the bush with you before, have I? Never helped you to defy the game laws of – I was going to say *our* country, but it's hard to tell exactly whose country it is. Never – have I?"

"Oh well, I'm getting old now, and the part we are going into isn't adapted to a skirt. Besides –"

"Besides – what?"

"Nothing."

Perhaps that other consideration had occurred to him. Decidedly she would be in the way – under certain circumstances.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter," rejoined Verna tranquilly. "I'm going, anyhow."

Chapter Five. The Temptation

Tall tree-trunks, straight standing or curved; a tangle of creepers and undergrowth; long rank grass, and a general effluvium of decay and stuffiness unpleasantly suggestive of fever – such were the general features of the Lumisana forest.

Its depths were gloomy and desolate to the last degree, and seldom penetrated. The natives carefully avoided the place, and if they did enter it would never do so except in groups. It was the haunt of dangerous snakes, of fierce and aggressive specimens of the mamba tribe, and of abnormal size, they held; and these there was no avoiding among the long grass and tangled undergrowth. Further, it was the especial haunt of the *Inswelaboya* – a species of hairless monster, half ghost, half human, given to strangling its victims on sight; and this was a more weighty consideration even than the fear of venomous reptiles.

This feeling on the part of the natives had its advantages, for the forest constituted part of one of the large tracts utilised as game preserves. Here koodoo were plentiful, with a sprinkling of the splendid sable antelope. Buffalo, too, haunted its gloomy depths, where the reed-fringed pools in the clearing afforded them a wallowing-place – and there was even a specimen or two of the rare white rhino. All these, of course, were rigidly protected, so far as it was possible to police so wild and difficult a tract of country at all. But the larger kind of game flourished. The natives, as we have said, shunned this gloomy wilderness, nor were the means of destruction at their disposal adequate. White men seldom came here, for permits were rarely given, and, failing such, the very act of getting the spoils away would have led to certain detection. But with Ben Halse the case was altogether different. He had exceptional advantages. He was resident on the spot, and knew every corner of those remote fastnesses. Then, too, he was hand in glove with the powerful chief of the district, and not a man of that chief's following would have dreamed of giving him away.

Now he was making his way along a narrow game path. Verna walked immediately behind him – they had left their horses at a kraal on the high ground, for this stuffy, forest-covered valley bottom was not altogether devoid of the tsetse fly. Behind her again walked Undhlawafa, followed by several Zulus in single file.

“I'm going to have first shot, dear,” whispered Verna, over her father's shoulder.

“Don't know. What if you miss?” he returned. “Those horns'll be worth a devil of a lot.”

“But I shan't miss. No, you must let me have first shot. I so seldom get a look in at anything big.”

She carried a light, sporting .303, its magazine loaded with Dum-dum cartridges. She knew how to use it, too, and hand and nerve were steady as rock. She was arrayed in just the costume for an expedition of the kind, a plain blouse and short bicycle skirt, and looked exceedingly ready and sportsmanlike; and after some couple of hours' walk over anything but easy ground, her step was as elastic as though she had just sallied forth.

Night had fallen, and though a glorious moon was sailing in the clear sky, so thick were the tall tree-tops that, meeting overhead, they plunged the pathway into gloom, networked here and there by the penetrating moonbeams. But here was none of the stillness of night. Large owls hooted loud and spectrally, and the nursery-like squall of the “bush-baby” – a species of lemur – was thrown forth, and echoed and answered from near and far. Now and then a sudden scuffle and rumbling retreat told that a buck had been disturbed and was making himself hurriedly scarce; or, not so harmless, perchance, a stealthy rustle in the grass would bring the party to a standstill.

“That's the worst of this walking in the dark,” said Ben Halse. “You never know when some infernal black mamba may jump up and hit you bang in the face. Then – good-night! Or you may tread on his tail while he's getting out of the way. Which amounts to the same thing.”

There was always the risk of this, of course, but risks have to be taken. Verna, for her part, was keenly enjoying this clandestine night-poaching expedition. There was that about it which appealed powerfully to her, and every fibre of her strong, healthy being thrilled with the sheer joy of life. Then, suddenly, the moonlight burst in through the trees in front. They had come to the edge of an open space.

Undhlawafa whispered caution. Then he ordered his followers to remain where they were – if anything to retire a little way back. He did not want to set up any more scent than was necessary. Then, cautiously, they advanced to the edge and peered forth.

In front lay an open space. It was swampy ground, caused by the trickle of a small stream which here expanded into reed-fringed pools. These were barely a hundred yards from where the stalkers lay concealed. At present there was no sign of life in the clearing, unless it were the occasional croak of a frog. Then something moved, and a small shape came stealing across the open to the water. It lapped a little, but was evidently uneasy, for it kept lifting its head and listening. Then, having hurriedly completed its drink, the jackal made for dark cover as fast as its legs could carry it.

“Wonder if it could have winded us,” whispered Ben Halse. “Yet we are on the right side for wind, too.”

“I’m to have first shot, remember,” returned Verna. Her father nodded.

A large owl floated across the open, hooting loudly and dismally. There was a hot stuffiness in the still, yellow, moonlit air, which was depressing. Then two hyenas came out to drink at the pool. They, at any rate, were under no misgivings, for, having drunk, they sat on their haunches and bayed the moon long and hideously. This performance concluded they began chasing each other, to the accompaniment of much snarling, till they, too, disappeared within the depths of the farther forest.

Now came a period of tense waiting, during which nothing stirred. Conversation, even in the faintest of whispers, was of course out of the question. Then a sound, unmistakable to these, bred among the sounds of the wilderness, was borne to their ears, the tramp of approaching hoofs.

“More than one,” whispered Ben Halse.

He was right. Advancing from the upper end of the open space were three large animals. Nearer – and lo! standing forth in the moonlight the splendid koodoo bull paced slowly down to the water. He was leading the way – half as large again as the two cows. A thrill of irrepressible eagerness ran through the watchers, the younger of them especially.

At the edge of the water the noble animal paused a moment before lowering his head to drink. His immense spiral horns reached far over his broad back, and the white stripes upon his dark hide were visible in the clear moonlight. Then Verna’s rifle spoke.

The effect, crashing through the stillness of the night, was almost appalling. The echoes roared through the silent forest from point to point, and the rush and thunder of flying hoofs seemed to shake the ground as the two cows sped for cover at lightning speed. But the bull – the splendid “record” bull – he made one mighty, powerful plunge into the air, then dropped over onto his side, and after one harsh half-bellow, half-groan, lay still.

“Well done, little girl, well done!” cried Ben Halse enthusiastically. “I never saw a cleaner shot. He’s got it bang through the heart, by the way he fell.”

“That’s where I aimed, dear,” she answered, flushed with the feeling of the thorough sportsman, that life could hardly contain better moments than this.

“*Inkosikazi!*” ejaculated old Undhlawafa admiringly. “*Mamé!* A wonder!”

They went over to the fallen animal, which lay motionless and stone dead. It was even as her father had said; Verna’s bullet had drilled clean through the heart of the mighty beast – a neat and sportsmanlike shot as ever was delivered.

“*That* pair of horns’ll stand us in for close on a hundred pounds,” pronounced Ben Halse. “Why, they must be the world’s record! I never saw any to come up to them in all my experience.”

“So the world’s record has been accounted for by only a girl,” said Verna merrily. “But you were a darling to let me have first shot.”

“Oh, as to that I was afraid you’d miss – women are so nervy and excitable.”

“Especially this woman!”

“Well, it doesn’t much matter who fired the shot, the point is we’ve got the horns, and they’ll be worth quite what I said, if not more.”

“Father, I’m ashamed of you. That’s a nice sportsmanlike way of talking, isn’t it?”

The other Zulus had now crowded up, and were firing off many ejaculations of amazement and admiration. It is possible that some of them remembered the occasion on which the bullet hole had been drilled in the wall of Ben Halse’s store. The butchery part of it devolved upon them. But this was a form of amusement they thoroughly enjoyed, and, moreover, they would have a big meat feast. The larger kind of buck, with the exception, perhaps, of the eland, is apt to be coarse and tasteless, and except for the more delicate part of this one, such as the saddle, Ben Halse wanted none. He, however, waited to see that the head, with its invaluable pair of horns, was properly taken care of. So they went to work merrily, and in an incredibly short space of time the carcass was duly quartered, and a big fire was lighted and a big roast started, by way of a preliminary, for there was no chance of interruption. There was nothing on earth to draw a patrol of that fine corps the Natal Police into the depths of the Lumisana forest at that ungodly hour of the night, short of very strong and very definite “information received.” Ben Halse and Verna, after their hours of tramping and the tension of waiting, took their share of the roast with keen and healthy appetites.

“Oh, I love this!” said the latter, cutting into a strip of the hissing grill with a pocket-knife and a sharpened stick for a fork. “Why, it’s worth all the sitting-down meals in the world!”

“Isn’t it?” rejoined her father. “Here, Undhlawafa. Here is something to send it down with.” And he produced a large flask of “square face” gin, and poured a goodly measure into the cup. The old Zulu’s face lit up.

“*Nkose!* It is good, *impela!*” and he drained it at two gulps.

“The worst of it is,” went on Verna, “the record pair of koodoo horns can’t be ticketed with my name. Because this is a poach, you know.”

“Oh, but it can – and shall. Denham has undertaken to indemnify me in any risks I run in procuring him specimens. This’ll stand us in for a hundred pounds at least. Why, the horns are a record! And I shall stick out that he placards on them a notice, that they were shot by you – shot fair and clean, by God! as I’ve never seen anything better shot.”

“All right, dear,” answered the girl. “Then some fine day the record leaks out that we have been shooting koodoo on a Government game preserve without a permit. What then?”

“What then? Why, I’m fined – say a hundred pounds. Denham makes that good, and – makes good the other hundred for the horns. But the chances are a thousand to one against the news ever reaching the proper quarter over here, for all purposes of prosecution, I mean. You see, it doesn’t specify *where* the thing was shot.”

“No; there’s something in that,” said Verna. “But I’d like to figure, if only in a rich man’s private museum, as having shot the record koodoo in the world.” And she laughed merrily.

The Zulus were busy cutting up the great antelope, which task they accomplished in a surprisingly short space of time, chattering and laughing among themselves as they devoured various portions of the tid-bits raw. In process of the talk Undhlawafa contrived to say something to Ben Halse – something “dark.” That worthy nodded.

“Stay here, Verna. I shall be back directly,” he said.

She looked at him for a moment full in the moonlight. Some instinct was upon her. Once before, the same instinct had moved her to intervene in a certain transaction of his, to intervene right at the critical moment, with the result of saving him from a disastrous fate as the outcome of what that transaction would have involved. The thing had hung in the balance; but her instinct had rung true,

her intervention had availed. He had been saved. Now that same instinct was upon her again. She could not for the life of her have defined its meaning, still – there it was.

“I’ll be back directly,” he went on. Then he and Undhlawafa disappeared within the black shades of the forest.

Verna, left there, set herself out to await her father’s return with that tranquil philosophy which was the result of her wild life and no particular upbringing. She watched the butchery proceedings in the clear, full moonlight, but with no interest. They were rather disgusting, but she had seen enough of that sort of detail for it to have little or no effect on her. She gazed forth upon the swampy, miasmatic open space and the sombre forest line bounding it, and gave a direction or two to the natives as to the head and horns of the trophy. Then she began to wonder when her father was coming back.

The latter and Undhlawafa had reached a spot in the forest where the trees were thin at the top, letting through a broad network of moonlight. Bending down the induna drew forth from some place of concealment a bag made of raw hide. It was heavy, and its contents clinked.

“Count these, U’ Ben,” he said, untying the *reimpje* that fastened it.

The trader’s eyes kindled and his pulses quickened somewhat as he picked up a handful out of the mass of golden sovereigns, letting it fall back through his fingers in a stream which flashed in the moonlight. This he did again and again – and the rich metallic clink of the falling coins was music to his ears. All this could be his for the taking – his, now and here, and in return an easy and not particularly risky service. Undhlawafa, the while, was reading his face.

“Is it not enough?” he said, in a tone that implied that more might conceivably be forthcoming in the event of a negative reply. “Yet – count the pieces.”

But Ben Halse did not do this. He continued to trickle the coins through his fingers, without replying. Why should he let go this opportunity of making a rich haul? If he did not take it somebody else would, and the result would be the same. Besides, no Zulu, or any other native for that matter, could hit a house with firearms unless he were locked up inside it, and then his bullet would probably miss it and go through the window. He was far more dangerous with his own native assegai – in fact, the possession of firearms rendered him less efficient with even that. These were the salves he applied to his conscience as he looked upon the mass of sovereigns shining in the moonlight, and played lovingly with them, and longed to possess them.

But the other side of the argument would obtrude itself. The mere possession of arms breeds the desire to use them – and this holds good especially of savages. He thought of the women and children scattered about at different centres throughout the land, and realised, as he had often done before, how any carefully planned, concealed and concerted outbreak would simply spell massacre for the lot in a single night. He thought of Verna – his Verna – and the land contained other people’s “Vernas.” No, he could not do it. He knew, of course, that he could send her out of the country at any time if things became too sultry – he would receive ample warning. But that consideration struck home. He could not do it.

“Where are you, father? Oh, there.”

The sweet, clear, fluty voice came upon him like an omen, and then the girl stepped to his side where he sat. One quick glance at the bag of gold, another at her father’s face, and instinct supplied the rest. She knew his particular weakness, but she said nothing then.

“We were talking over a certain deal, dear, Undhlawafa and I. The terms are good.”

“Well, I’ve interrupted you. But to-morrow will do as well, won’t it?” she answered carelessly. “Let’s go home.”

The induna sat tranquilly taking snuff. He, for his part, felt pretty sure that his offer would be closed with – if not to-night, why, then, to-morrow. Verna, for her part, felt rather more sure that it would not. But Ben Halse got up to leave, and the bag containing two hundred golden sovereigns still remained in the possession of Undhlawafa.

Chapter Six. The Police

Sergeant Meyrick and First Class Trooper Francis, of the Natal Police, were riding at a foot's pace along the rough and sandy waggon track which skirts the Lumisana forest, and they were proceeding northward.

Both men were excellent samples of that efficient corps: young, athletic, hard as nails. Neither was of colonial birth, but had been some years in the force, and by now thoroughly knew their way about. To-day they were doing a patrol, for which purpose they had started from their isolated station the previous afternoon and had camped in the veldt towards midnight. A thick mist, which had come down during the small hours, blotting out everything, had delayed their morning start. Now it had rolled back, revealing great bushy slopes, and rocks shining grey and red in the moisture, which moisture the sun was doing his best to parch up.

The two men looked thoroughly smart and serviceable in their khaki-coloured uniforms and helmets, each with a regulation revolver slung round him in a holster, but no rifle. Their mounts were wiry, hard-bitten nags of medium height, and in good condition.

"I'm still puzzling over that shot we heard," Meyrick was saying. "Why, it seemed to come from bang in the thick of the bush; but who the deuce would be letting off guns right there at that time of night. No nigger would go in there then for a bribe. It's too much *tagati*. They funk it like the devil."

"*Tagati!* I should think so," laughed Francis. "I still don't believe it was a shot at all. I've a theory it was a sort of meteorite exploding. Seemed to come from up in the air too."

"Sound travels the devil's own distance at night. What if it was beyond the forest belt? There are kraals out that way."

The other was unconvinced.

"Sound does travel, as you say," he rejoined. "But for that very reason no blooming nigger would lash off a gun in the middle of the night to give away that there was such a thing in existence among the kraals. An assegai or knobkerrie would do the trick just as well, and make no noise about it. No, I stick to my meteorite theory."

"Right-oh! It's going to be damned hot," loosening his uniform jacket. "Let's push on or we shan't get to old Halse's by dinner-time, and he does you thundering well when you get to his shebang. Whatever they may say about old Ben, he's the most hospitable chap you'd strike in a lifetime."

"Isn't he a retired gun-runner – if he *has* retired, that is?" said Francis, who was new to that part of the country. "At least so the yarn goes."

"The said yarn is very likely true. There are 'no witnesses present,' so I don't mind recording my private belief that it is. But there's this to be said – that when he did anything in that line it was only when the niggers were fighting each other, and in that case he rendered humanity a service by helping to keep their numbers down. I don't believe he'd trade them a single gas-pipe if they were going for us. I've a better opinion of old Ben than that."

"Don't know. I haven't been up here so long as you; but I've heard it said, down country, that gun-running gets into the blood. 'Once a gun-runner, always a gun-runner.' What-oh! Suppose Dinuzulu were to start any tricks, wouldn't our friend Ben see his way to making his little bit then?"

"I don't believe he would; and what's more to the point, I don't see how he could. But I say – hang gun-running. Don't you get smashed upon his daughter. She's a record of a fine girl."

"So I've heard from you chaps until I'm sick. You all seem smashed on her."

"By Jove! She can ride and shoot with any of us," went on Meyrick, rather enthusiastically, which caused his comrade to guffaw.

"I don't freeze on to 'male' women," he said.

“You just wait until you see her,” was the rejoinder. “Not much ‘male’ about her.”

“What a chap you are on the other sex, Meyrick. What’s the good of a fellow in the force, with no chance of promotion, bothering about all that. Much better make ourselves jolly as we are.”

“Good old cynic, Frank,” said the other. “Wait till you see Verna Halse, and I’ll bet you get smashed. Nice name ‘Verna,’ isn’t it?”

“Don’t know it’s anything out of the ordinary. But cynic or not, here we are, a brace of superfluous and utterly impecunious sons of two worthy country parsons, bunked out here to fish for ourselves. You’ll be made a Sub-Inspector soon, you’ve got it in you. I shan’t, and I haven’t. So I’m not going to bother about ‘skirt.’”

They had reached the spot where the tongue of forest points off onto the road edge and there ends. The ground was more open here.

“Hot as blazes!” commented Francis, swabbing his forehead. “What’s this? *Au! Gahle – gahle!*”

The latter as three native women, squatted in the grass by the roadside, stood up to give the salute, the suddenness whereof caused the horses to shy. In the grass beside them lay several bundles such as native women often carry when passing from place to place, only these were unusually large.

The two police troopers fired off a humorous expostulation – they had both qualified in their knowledge of the Zulu for extra linguistic pay – and passed on their way. The track grew steeper and steeper, and the sun hotter and yet more hot. They would soon be at Ben Halse’s store, with the prospect of an excellent dinner and a welcome rest before them. And behind them, in a contrary direction, laughing to themselves, travelled the three women they had just passed, bending under the burden of the loads poised upon their heads – the said loads containing each a goodly quarter of koodoo meat, of the meat of the lordly koodoo bull, the possession of which would have entailed upon them, and upon all concerned, if detected, the direst of pains and penalties. Yet there was nothing suspicious-looking about those bundles, nothing to make any reasonable being under the sun think it worthwhile investigating their contents.

“I wonder what sort of a man this Mr Denham is, father?” said Verna, as she stood, in the middle of the morning, watching the cleaning and preparation for preserving the great head, which was being effected by a native under the critical supervision of his master.

“Quite all right,” was the answer. “He pays down on the nail, or rather, by return mail; never haggles or votes the prices too long. It’s all I can do to resist the temptation to put them up.”

“Well, then, go on resisting it, dear. I’m sure it’ll pay in the long run,” said the girl decisively.

“Yes, I’ve always had an instinct that way myself. Denham gives thundering good prices as it is, and, I tell you, we’ve made a pretty good thing out of him.”

“But I wonder what he’s like personally,” went on Verna. “I wish you hadn’t lost that photo he sent you when I was away.”

“Yes, it’s a pity, but for the life of me I can’t think what the devil became of it. He was a good-looking chap, though, and I should think by the look of the portrait, a fine, well-built chap too. Well, we shall probably never meet. It’s certain I shall never go to England again, and he’s not likely to turn up here.”

“I suppose not.”

“Well, long live our trade together, anyhow. He’d give anything, by the way, for a good specimen of the *indhlonhlo*¹, but they’ve become so jolly scarce, which is just as well. Anyhow, that’s a beast that isn’t affected by these cursed silly game laws. But it’s a sort of joker you don’t get a chance of killing except with a charge of buckshot, and that spoils the skin.”

“Well, then, it’s better left alone. I’ve always heard they are the most fiendish brutes to tackle. It isn’t worth throwing away one’s life for the sake of a few pounds more or less.”

¹ A snake of the *mamba* species, which grows to a considerable size, very scarce, and with a proportionately bad reputation.

“Few pounds more or less!” echoed Ben Halse. “Why where would I – where would *we*– have been if I had always run on that notion? Little girl, it’s for you that I want to screw out every penny I can, no matter how I do it. For *you*.”

“Then knock off doing it, dear, especially in some directions. That won’t bring me any good, to put it on that ground. Now that deal with Undhlawafa is off, dead off? Isn’t it?”

The last rather anxiously.

“Well, I don’t know – yes, I suppose it is,” somewhat undecidedly.

The girl shook her head.

“Of course it is,” she returned. “It’s not to be thought of for a moment. We are not in dire need, remember, though even then such a thing would be out of the question. Yes, quite off. My instinct has been right before, remember.”

“So it has. No, I shan’t touch this affair. They’ll have to get somebody else.”

“*Nkose! O’ Nongqai!*” (The police.)

Both started. The interruption came from the trader’s other boy, who had slipped into the yard in a state of some consternation.

“Where, Panjani?” said his master.

“Down yonder, *Nkose*,” pointing to the lower country. In a moment both were outside and in front of the dwelling.

Far below, on the plain, which looked humpy from this altitude, two mounted figures were approaching. There was no need to get out a field-glass; the native eyesight, as well as their own, was keen enough. But the two arrivals could not arrive for the best part of an hour. Ben Halse went calmly back to the yard, and further directed the preparation of the great head, with its record horns. Then, rubbing a lot of salt and pepper into it, he covered it with a waggon sail. Verna, watching this proceeding, was struck with a sudden thought.

“Father, what about the koodoo sirloin I’ve got on the roast?” she said.

“Keep it there till it’s done. They won’t know it from beef. Howling joke, eh?”

“Rather,” she laughed. “They’ll all unconsciously aid and abet us in breaking the laws of Cetywayo’s country.”

The police horses were toiling up the slope, then standing with heaving flanks in front of the store. Their riders were not sorry to dismount.

“Well, Mr Halse, how goes it?” cried Meyrick, shaking hands. “Miss Halse – why, you are looking better than ever since those two dances we had together at Ezulwini.”

“Oh, thanks,” laughed Verna. “But that’s a poor compliment. You ought not to have allowed the possibility that I could look better than ever.”

“Sharp as ever, anyhow,” retorted Meyrick. And his comrade broke into a guffaw.

“This is Francis,” he introduced, “commonly known in the force as Frank. It’s shorter, you see, and means the same thing. Now we all know each other.”

“Not got your step yet, sergeant?” said Ben Halse. “Thought you’d have been Sub-Inspector next time I met you.”

“Don’t chaff, Mr Halse. It’s a sore point with me. The powers that be are so dashed ungrateful.”

“Well, anyway, come inside and have a refresher after your ride. I’ll send my boy to off-saddle for you. Scoff will be ready directly.”

“We kept it back on purpose when we saw you toiling up there beyond Lumisana,” said Verna. “If the sirloin is overdone it’s due to that.”

“Sirloin! By Jove! that’s royal!” cried Meyrick. Whereat Verna laughed mischievously.

Assuredly Ben Halse’s *ménage* kept up its reputation for hospitality, thought these two guardians of law and order, as they sat there doing full justice to the result of the midnight poaching expedition.

“Why, this beef is A1,” pronounced Meyrick, beginning upon a second helping. “You couldn’t get anything like it even in Old England.”

“I’m sure you couldn’t,” assented their host, with a touch of dryness, while Verna’s eyes danced. “The bottle’s at your right elbow – help yourself. What’s the latest from down country, by the way?”

“All sorts of yarns. They are brewing *up* for a row in Natal. There’s a sweep called Babatyana inclined to make trouble. Now, Mr Halse, you ought to be an authority. If there’s a bust-up there do you think it’ll spread up here?”

“Sure to. But, to what extent is another thing.”

“How does feeling run in these parts? Sapazani, you know, doesn’t carry a particularly good reputation.”

“Depends on how it’s handled. By the way, if I were you I wouldn’t name names,” for the boy had just come into the room to change the plates, and the swift look of interest that had flashed across his face as he caught the name of his chief was not lost on the experienced up-country man. “This boy here belongs to his tribe, and he’ll connect his chief’s name with the police uniform. See?”

Meyrick felt small, and said so.

“Did he hear? What an idiot I am. Well, Mr Halse, you were chaffing me about the Sub-Inspectorship, but it’s obvious I’m not ripe for it yet.”

Ben Halse passed it off with a tactful and consolatory remark, and they talked about other things. Not until afterwards did it occur to Meyrick that his host had given him no information whatever on the subject of the loyalty of Sapazani.

“He’s got some cheek, that same party whom we won’t name,” said Francis. “He flatly refused to salute his magistrate with the ‘*Bayéte*’ when he went to see him – hailed him as ‘*Inkose*’ instead; said the ‘*Bayéte*’ was the salute for kings.”

“He’s about right,” said Ben Halse. “There’s a precious deal too much of that ‘*Bayéte*’ joke going along. Every waggon-builder’s apprentice seems to expect it. What did Downes say? I’d like to have been there.”

“He nearly died of rage. Then he asked Sapazani, rather sneeringly, which king he would give the ‘*Bayéte*’ to, and the answer was, ‘Any *king*,’ which was rather smart. Downes talked of arresting him for treating his court with insolence, but there were only three of our chaps in the place, and Sapazani had a following with him big enough to have captured the whole show, even with kerries, so he chucked that plan.”

“Well, he was wise there,” said Ben Halse. “There’s no law in existence here or anywhere else I know of, that compels a native to address his magistrate as ‘Your Majesty,’ which is what giving him the salute royal amounts to. And this particular chief – to name no names – is quite knowing enough to get hold of a lawyer to stick up for him. There’s more than one that would be glad to, and could do it too.”

The fact was that the speaker knew all about this incident as well as did the narrator – and a good deal more connected with it which the latter didn’t, but this he kept to himself.

“Sapazani is a great friend of ours,” said Verna; “but I should think he’d be quite capable of making himself disagreeable if he was rubbed the wrong way.”

Then they talked on, about other things and people, and the afternoon wore on. Suddenly Meyrick was seen to start as if he had been shot, and to grope wildly and hurriedly in his pockets.

“I’m most awfully sorry, Mr Halse, for being such a forgetful ass,” he said; “but I forgot to give you this” – producing a letter. “Two of our chaps came back from Ezulwini and brought it out.”

“That’s all right. I dare say it isn’t a matter of life and death,” was the characteristic answer. But the speaker’s face was not wholly guiltless of a look of astonishment as he saw the envelope; and this was evoked not so much by the sight, of the handwriting as by the fact that the missive had never been through the post. While his guests were saddling up he quickly mastered the contents, and his astonishment did not decrease.

“How should you like a run down to Ezulwini, Verna?” he said, after the police had gone.

“To Ezulwini?”

“Yes; perhaps to Durban.”

“I’d like it a lot. Makes a change. I’m quite jolly here, but still, a change bucks one up a bit.”

Her father smiled to himself. That letter had given him an idea which tickled him, for he had a very comical side.

“But what’s on?” she said. “Are we clearing out? Has it become time to?”

“No, no. There’s no row on – as yet. That’ll come, sooner or later, all in good time. Only business.”

“Oh! What kind?”

Verna was so completely in her father’s confidence in every department of the same that there was no inquisitiveness underlying the query. There was a joke in the background of this, however, which he was not going to let her into. It would keep.

“What kind?” he repeated. “Oh, general. I say, though, Meyrick and Francis are nice chaps, aren’t they? but, good Lord! their faces would have been a study if they could have seen through that heap of waggon sail in the yard that was staring them in the eye through the window all the time they were scoffing the other bit of the owner of that head, which was browsing away in Lumisana this time yesterday. Eh? Beef! Roast beef of Old England! That was killingly funny. What?”

“Yes, it was,” rejoined Verna, who was gazing after the receding figures of the police, growing smaller and smaller on the plain below. “Still, the mistake was excusable. There’s not much difference between either. When are we going to Ezulwini, dear?”

“H’m. In a day or two.”

Chapter Seven. The Chief

Sapazani's principal kraal was situated in a bushy hollow, shut in on three sides by a crescent of cliff and rock abounding in clefts and caves. It contained something like a hundred dome-shaped huts standing between their symmetrical ring fences, and the space immediately surrounding it was open, save for a small clump of the flat-topped thorn-tree, Sapazani, as we have shown, was ultra-conservative, and the slovenly and slipshod up-to-date formation of a kraal – or rather lack of formation, with huts dumped down anyhow – did not obtain among his clan. They kept to the old-fashioned double-ringed fence.

Now this very conservatism on the part of Sapazani rendered him an object of suspicion and distrust among the authorities administering the country, for it pointed to “aims.” The other chiefs were content to come into the townships in grotesque medley of European clothing – as required by law – trousers, a waistcoat and shirt-sleeves, or long overcoats and broad-brimmed hats, that give to any savage an absurd and undignified appearance, but this one not. He was obliged to wear clothing on the occasions when his presence was officially required at the seats of administration, but when he did so he wore a riding suit of unimpeachable cut, and boots and spurs accordingly, but under no circumstances had he ever been known to wear a hat. He would not cover up and conceal his head-ring, as did the others. The fact of his not “falling into line” rendered him open to distrust, as a man with a strong hankering after the old state of things, and consequently dissatisfied with the new, therefore a man who might become dangerous. And there were not wanting, just then, circumstances under which he might become very dangerous indeed.

Sapazani's kraal was remote from the seat of magistracy of his district, for which reason he was required to present himself in person, on some pretext or other, rather more frequently than was usual. To such summons he never failed to respond without delay. But also he never failed so to present himself without a considerable following. This fact sorely puzzled the authorities. They did not like it; yet to remonstrate would seem to argue that they were afraid of him, an attitude absolutely fatal to the prestige of the ruling race. And the said ruling race needed all its prestige just then, when there were less than a hundred mounted police in the whole of Zululand, and not much more than three times that number of Volunteer Rifles, but scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country pursuing their ordinary civil avocations.

Sapazani was just old enough to have fought as a mere youth in the Zulu war of '79, and quite old enough to have fought well, and with some distinction on the Usutu side during the struggle which culminated in the exile of his present chief to Saint Helena. Now his relations with his said present chief – repatriated – were something of a mystery to the ruling race, and there were those who thought that given the opportunity he would not be averse to usurping his present chief's position and authority; for he, too, came of royal stock, in that he was of the Umtetwa tribe and could claim descent from the House of Dingiswayo. His relations with Ben Halse dated from the time of the above-mentioned struggle in which his father, Umlali, had been killed, thus leaving him in undisputed succession to the chieftainship.

The sun was dropping over the lip of cliff-ringed crescent which shut in the hollow. Sapazani sat outside his hut, surrounded by three or four indunas, taking snuff; in this, too, he was conservative, not having yet come to the European pipe. The cattle were being brought in for milking, and the frantic bellowing of calves, and the responsive “moo” of their mothers, mingled with the shrill-voiced shouts of the young boys who were driving the respective herds. His thoughts were busy. News – great news – had come in. Down in Natal events were stirring. The tribes there were arming, and they were looking towards Zululand. No longer were they the white man's dogs, as during the great

war, when they had dared to come into the Zulu country to fight for the white man, and side by side with him. Now they were looking towards the House of Senzangakona, and – the representative of that House was dumb.

The song and clear laughter of women and girls bringing up water from the stream sounded pleasant and melodious upon the evening air, and the deep-toned voices of men, criticising the condition and well-being of the cattle in the kraal.

Blue reeks of smoke rose from the huts. The whole scene, in short, was one of quiet and pastoral peace; but in the chief's plotting brain peace was the last consideration that entered. Peace! What was he but a mere slave – obliged to go here, or go there, at the bare official word? Peace! All the blood in his warrior veins fired at the word. Peace! on those terms! Every downy-faced youth among the whites expected him to salute him as a king: he, the descendant of kings. The black preacher of another race, who had stealthily visited his kraal two moons back preaching "Africa for the Africans," had inspired him with ideas. He had listened, had turned the man, so to say, inside out; but one idea had taken hold. Sapazani was shrewd. He knew that by force of arms, by sheer force of arms alone, his people were incapable of holding their own. They could "eat up" every white in the country, and that in a single night. But they could not hold it afterwards. The whites could pour in such reinforcements as to eat *them* up in turn. But the one idea which the preacher had left in his mind was that the whites were so divided among themselves that there would be those high in the councils of the dominant nation who would compel their countrymen to concede to the Zulus their own land. It was rather mysterious, but he had heard it from other sources, from one, especially, of weight and knowledge, and more than half believed it. If that were so, and they could make a fight for it, why, then, all this officialdom might soon become a thing of the past, and he – Sapazani – a chief of weight, and in the full prime of his intellectual and physical gifts, and the descendant of a royal house, he saw himself king. As well as shrewd, Sapazani was ambitious.

"And the last word of U' Ben was 'No,'" the chief was saying.

"That was it," answered Undhlawafa. "But that his child came up while we talked I think it would have been 'Yes.'"

"Ha!" ejaculated Sapazani, now vividly interested. "What said she?"

"That I know not, son of Umlali, for I understand not the tongue of the Amangisi. But I spoke again about it yesterday, and again he refused."

"Strange!" said the chief. "U' Ben loves money."

"Who does not, son of Umlali, since the whites have brought it into the country? But though U' Ben loves money, I think that he loves his child more."

The chief made no reply. A very curious vein of thought – for a Zulu – was running through his mind, of which, could Ben Halse have had the smallest inkling, that estimable trader would have cleared out at very short notice and have set up in business in some other part of South Africa considerably remote from this.

"U' Ben is a fool," he rejoined after a pause. "He must be growing too rich. We can get them brought," he went on, talking "dark," "and for less money. But he has always been a friend, and I wanted to give it to him. Is his mouth really shut, think you, Undhlawafa?"

"It is, I think. Besides, there is that about him which does not incline him to move other people to talk," answered the induna meaningly. "And now, son of Umlali, what of the messenger?"

The chief's face grew heavy, deepening into a scowl.

"Who are these that they are to order us hither and thither?" he said. "It is only a day ago (figurative) that I was required to attend. Let the dog come forward."

In compliance with this mandate the said "dog" presently did appear, in the shape of a well-looking, middle-aged Zulu, wearing a long coat with brass buttons, also the head-ring. He saluted the chief respectfully enough, but Sapazani gazed at him sourly.

"So thou art here again, Manyana-ka-Mahlu, and still as the white man's dog? *Hau!*"

The point of which remark was that the man addressed was court messenger at the magistracy in whose jurisdiction Sapazani was resident.

“*Nkose!* A man must live,” was the answer, with a deprecatory smile. “And we are not all born chiefs.”

Sapazani’s eyes blazed into fury, and gripping his stick he half rose. But a whisper from Undhlawafa restrained him – that, combined with another thought.

“Dog of the Abelungu,” he answered, now cool and sneering. “It is well for thee that although some of us were *born* chiefs we *are* chiefs no longer. *Hau!* Yet state thy message.”

The man was apologetic. Who was he to offend one of the great House of Umtetwa? he protested. He meant no such thing. He was only showing how he himself was forced to receive the white man’s money. Had there been any other way of living he need not have done so, but he was poor, and the white man ruled the land.

Then he proceeded to deliver his message. The attendance of Sapazani was required three days thence, to give evidence in a rather intricate case of disputed ownership of cattle then pending between certain of his own followers. The chief’s temper did not improve.

“Ho, Manyana. I wronged thee just now,” he said, “I called thee the white man’s dog, but we are all the white man’s dogs – I among them the most. Well, so far thy message. I will be there, as how should it be otherwise since we lie beneath the heel of these little great great ones who rule the land?” he concluded, bitterly sneering.

“*Nkose!*”

“Well, there are those who will give thee food and drink. Withdraw.”

“*Nkose!*”

The messenger obeyed, and the chief sat moodily. Would anything come of the unrest that was seething on the other side of the Tugela? He – to be summoned to take a long journey on account of some trumpety cattle case! Yet, was that only a pretext? was the sudden suspicion which flashed through his mind. Well, if it was not much was likely to come of it. No armed force had been mobilised by the whites as yet in any part of the country, and in case of any attempt at arresting him, why, as we have said, he was not in the habit of going into civilisation exactly alone. The voice of Undhlawafa broke in upon his musings.

“It is not well, son of Umlali, to shake sticks at those who come from the court,” he said drily. He was an old man, and privileged. “Manyana grows from a good tree, but what if some other had been sent, and had returned to say that he had been received with roughness, and that Sapazani was not loyal?”

“Loyal!” echoed the chief, in bitter disgust. “Loyal! *Hau!* Loyal – to whom?”

Beyond a murmur which might have meant anything, the other made no reply. Sapazani looked up and around. It was nearly dark. The sounds of evening had merged into the sounds of night. Most of the inhabitants of the kraal had retired within the huts, for there was a chill feeling in the air. He arose.

“The other messenger,” he said. “Now we will talk with him.”

He, too, went into his hut, and drawing his green blanket round him proceeded to take snuff. Undhlawafa, who, after a whispered injunction to some one outside, had followed him, proceeded to do likewise.

Soon a man crept through the low doorway and saluted. In his then frame of mind the chief noted with double irritation that the new arrival wore that abomination, in his eyes, the article of European clothing commonly called a shirt. Squatted on the ground the latter’s mission unfolded itself bit by bit. All the tribes in the north of Natal were ready. Those in the south of the Zulu country were ready too. How was it with those in the north?

In reply to this Sapazani and his induna put a number of questions to the emissary, as the way of natives is. These were answered – some straightly, some crooked.

“And He – what is *his* word?”

“He is dumb,” replied the emissary. “There are those who have spoken in his ear, and He is dumb.”

Sapazani sat, thinking deeply. “He” applied to the head of the royal House. More than ever did the insidious poison of the Ethiopian preacher of whom mention has been made, come back to his mind. Now he saw his own chance. Not by force of arms alone could a change be effected; but by the dissensions among the ruling race. Now was the time – before it should pass.

“Tell him who sent you,” he said, “that at the moment I shall be ready. That is my ‘word.’”

“*Nkose!*”

Chapter Eight.

The Prospectors

“I’ve got some news for you, Stride.”

He addressed was just dismounting. Obviously he had returned from a journey. His steed was flecked with sweat and had rather a limp appearance, as though ridden through the heat of a long day, and, withal, a hot one. A tent and a makeshift native shelter, together with a roughly run-up stable constituted the prospectors’ camp on the Mhlungwana River.

“Well, spit it out, then, if it’s worth having,” returned the other, with a light laugh. He was a tall, well-built young fellow, bronzed with the healthy, open-air life.

“Man, but there’s no that hurry,” said the first speaker, with a twinkle in his eyes. “First of all, what’s the news Grey Town way?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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