Mitford Bertram

A Veldt Official: A Novel of Circumstance

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
"Where's doppersdorp?"

"Now where the very mischief *is* Doppersdorp?"

He who thus uttered his thoughts aloud looked up from the sheet of paper in his hand, and gazed forth over the blue waters of Algoa Bay. Over the vessels riding at their anchorage his gaze wandered, over the stately hulls of two or three large mail steamships similar to that upon whose deck he then stood; over the tall, tapering masts and web-like rigging of numerous sailing craft; over the flotilla of cargo-boats and lighters; over the low, sandy shores and sunbaked buildings of busy, dusty Port Elizabeth, right away to the bold ridges of the Winterhoek range looming black and hazy to the blue heavens; then returned to re-peruse the large official communication. Thus it began: —

Sir, – I have the honour to inform you that His Excellency the Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, has been pleased to appoint you to be – provisionally – clerk to

the Resident Magistrate of Doppersdorp, and distributer of stamps… Then followed particulars as to salary, and, with the request that the recipient would be good enough to proceed to that place as soon as possible, somebody whose name he could not quite decipher, but whose style was "Acting Under Colonial Secretary," had the honour to be his obedient servant.

The letter was dated from the Colonial Secretary's Office, and was directed to "Roden Musgrave, Esq."

"The pay is not profuse," soliloquised the fortunate recipient of this missive, "especially to make a fresh start upon at my time of life. Well, the old saw about beggars and choosers holds good, but – where the very deuce *is* Doppersdorp?"

"Hallo, Musgrave! Had ten thousand a year left you?" cried a jolly, hail-the-maintop sort of voice behind him.

Its owner was a powerfully built man of middle age, whose handsome face, bronzed and bearded, was lit up by a pair of keen brown eyes with a merry twinkle in them which was more than half satirical. He was clad in a dark blue, gold-laced, quasi-naval uniform.

"You know something about this country, eh, skipper?" said the other, turning away from the taffrail, over which he had been leaning.

"I ought to by now, considering the number of years I've had to do with it," was the confident reply.

"So? Well, I'll bet you a bottle of Heidsieck you don't answer the first question I put to you concerning it. But whether I win

or lose it'll be our parting drink together."

"Our parting drink? Man alive, what sort of humbug are you talking? Aren't we going on as far as Natal together, and haven't we only just begun our unlading? That means two days more here, if not three. Then we are sure to be kept a couple of days at East London. So this day week we can talk about our parting drink, not to-day."

"Never mind that for a moment. Is that bet on?"

"All right – yes. Now then, what's the question?"

"Where is Doppersdorp?"

"Eh?"

"To be more explicit – what section of this flourishing colony is distinguished by the proud possession of the town or village of Doppersdorp?"

"I'll be hanged if I know."

"I thought not. Skipper, you've lost; so order up the Monopole, while I dive down and roll up my traps, for to that unpromising township, of so far nebulous locality, I am officially directed to proceed without loss of time."

"The dickens you are! That's a nuisance, Musgrave; especially as all the other fellows are leaving us here. I thought you were going on to Natal with us."

"So did I. But nothing is certain in this world, let alone the plans of such a knock-about as yours truly. Well, we've done more than our share of lie-splitting during the last three weeks, Cheyne, and it'll be for your moral good now to absorb some of

the improving conversation of that elderly party who is dying to come down to your end of the table; also of Larkins, who can succeed to my chair."

"Oh, Larkins!" grunted the other contemptuously. "Every voyage the saloon has its percentage of fools, but Larkins undoubtedly is the prize fool of the lot. Now, if there's one thing more than another I cannot stand, it's a fool."

The commander of the *Siberian* was not exactly a popular captain, a fact perhaps readily accounted for by the prejudice we have just heard him enunciate; yet he was more feared than disliked, for he was possessed of a shrewd insight into character, and a keen and biting wit, and those who came under its lash were not moved thereby precisely to love its owner. But, withal, he was a genial and sociable man, ever willing to promote and assist in the diversions of his passengers, as to sports, theatricals, concerts, and the like; so, although a trifle merciless towards those, and they were not few, whose ambition in life seemed to consist in asking questions and making remarks of a stark idiotic nature, he got on very well with his passengers on the whole. Moreover, he was an excellent sailor, and, without being a martinet, was a strict disciplinarian; consequently, in consideration of the comfort, and shipshape readiness of the ordering of things on board the *Siberian*, passengers who were capable of appreciation could forgive a little sarcasm at the hands of her commander.

Those whom Captain Cheyne liked invariably returned the

predilection, those whom he disliked were sure not to remain unaware of the fact. And out of a full complement of first-class passengers this voyage, the one to whom he had taken most was Roden Musgrave; perhaps because of the quality they held in common, a chronic cynicism and a rooted contempt for the weaker-minded of their fellows – i.e., the bulk of human kind. Anyhow, they would sit and exchange aphorisms and anecdotes illustrative of this, until one of the other two or three passengers who almost nightly participated in that snug and convivial gathering, was wont to declare that it was like the sharpening of saws steeped in vinegar, to sit and listen to Musgrave and the skipper in the latter's cabin an hour or so before turning in.

"But if you don't know where this place is, how the deuce do you know you've got to go ashore here, eh?" pursued the captain.

"Ha, ha! Because I don't want to, of course. Fancy you asking such a question!"

"It may be nearer to go on to East London and land there. Here, I say, Walker," he broke off, hailing an individual who, laden with bags and bundles, was superintending the heaving of his heavier luggage into a boat alongside; "where on earth is Doppersdorp?"

"Ha! There you are, are you captain? I was hunting for you everywhere to say good-bye. Doppersdorp? Doppersdorp? No, hang me if I do know! Sounds like some good old Dutch place, buried away up in the Karroo most likely. Well, ta-ta. Excuse my

hurry, but I shall barely catch the Uitenhage train." And he made for the gangway again.

"That looks bad," said Musgrave. "A place nobody seems so much as to have heard of is likely to be a hole indeed."

"What are you going there for, if it's not an impertinent question?" said the captain.

"Got a Government billet."

"Well, come along to my crib and we'll settle that bet. I've got a map or two that may give the place."

Not without a qualm did Musgrave find himself for the last time within that snug berth where he had spent so many festive evenings, whether it was when the rain and spray was lashing the closed scuttles while the vessel was rolling under half steam against the tempestuous Biscayan surges, or with door and windows alike thrown wide open as she glided through the oily stillness and moist heat of tropical waters. In his heart of hearts he was perhaps a little sorry that the voyage was over. Most of the passengers had left the ship at Capetown, and the remainder on dropping anchor in Algoa Bay early that morning, with the exception of half a dozen or so, bound for the other coast ports, among whom until a few minutes ago he had reckoned himself.

"Here's the place," said the captain after a brief scrutiny of the map he had just unrolled; "I thought as much. Stuck away in the middle of the Karroo. Yes, you'd better land here after all. You can get at it easier from here, but it will mean about two days or more of post-cart travelling after you leave the train. Well,

I wonder when we shall meet again! Perhaps we'll take the run home together one of these days."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably that event will never come off," he said. "The magnificent start I'm making doesn't seem to hold out large margin for saving up a fortune against ripe old age. So here goes for assisting to represent the Colonial Government among the Boers and the boundless Karroo."

"Hold on, though. You needn't be in such an all-fired hurry to start off there," said the captain. "I'm going ashore myself this afternoon, and there's plenty of room for your luggage in my gig. Then we might dine at the Phoenix, and start you off all snug and comfortable by the night train. There's the second lunch bell going now. Come along down, and we'll get outside that bottle of Heidsieck, for I own I fairly lost the bet."

Roden Musgrave was neither young nor old, but just touching middle age; a vague term, however, and variable, according to the inclination of whoever may define it. He was a clean-built, well-set-up man, whose dark hair was just beginning to be tipped here and there with frost. His face was clean shaven, save for the moustache which helped to hide a firm, though somewhat melancholy, mouth. He had good, clear-cut features and rather deep-set grey eyes, in which there was something which seemed to tell that he had known strange experiences; an impression which was heightened by a curious, indented double scar on the left side of the chin, and which, standing out livid from a

complexion sun-tanned almost to swarthiness, gave an expression at times bordering on the sinister. Somehow, too, the face was not that of a man whose record is open to all comers. There was a schooled and guarded look upon it, which seemed to show plainly enough to the close observer that it was not the face its owner had started with in life. But what such record might be the curious could only guess, for this man was the closest of mortals. On the topic dearest to the heart of most of us – self to wit – he never talked, and after weeks of the unguarded companionship of life at sea, during which people are apt to wax confidential – a great deal too much so – not one of his fellow-passengers knew a jot more about him than when he first stepped on board; that is to say nothing.

"Who the devil is that fellow Musgrave?" queried the smoke-room.

"Oh, some card-sharper, most likely," would reply a Kimberley-bound Jew, disgusted in that he had met with more than his match. But this of course was no more than conjecture, and a satisfactory answer was not to be had.

"Now who can that Mr Musgrave be?" was the more soft-toned interrogative of the saloon. "Surely you must know, Captain Cheyne. What is he going out for?"

To which the captain would reply, with a laugh of cynical delight, that he knew no more than they did, but that the readiest way of solving the difficulty would be to apply to Musgrave himself, drawing down from the discomfited fair ones the oft-

repeated verdict that he was so horridly sarcastic.

But whoever Musgrave was or was not, the fact remained that he went down the side of the *Siberian* that afternoon, glad to take up the subordinate post in the Cape Government service, which a bit of lucky interest had procured for him; content to start afresh at his time of life in a far-away, up-country township, upon a not extravagant salary.

Chapter Two.
The Post-Cart Travellers

Drip, drip, drip, in one unbroken downpour falls the rain. Scuds of floating wrack are wreathing the tree-tops and boulders higher up the bush-grown slopes, and the grey, opaque, lowering sky renders the desolate waste yet more gloomy and forbidding. Floundering, splashing, stumbling, even the team of four serviceable nags appears to experience some difficulty in drawing its load, a two-wheeled Cape cart to wit, crammed pretty nearly to the full measure of its carrying capacity; for the whole well of the cart is filled up. Even the seats cannot be turned to their original purpose, for they too are loaded up with sacks; and upon this irregular pile are three human beings, who are under the necessity of holding on as best they may, insecurely perched upon a sort of dome of rough and uneven surface. Some *reims*, or rawhide thongs, have been lashed across the top of this perch for them to hold on to, a concession to human weakness for which they are expected to feel jubilantly grateful; for they are only passengers, and – as those who have gone through the experience can certify, to their cost – the comfort, well-being, and safety of mere passengers are held by every self-respecting colonial post contractor in the profoundest contempt. For the vehicle is a post-cart, and the sacks upon which a limited number of Her Majesty's

lieges are graciously permitted to travel – if haply they can hold on – contain Her Majesty's mails.

Some of the oft-detailed horrors of post-cart travelling seem to have fallen to the lot of the occupants of this one. Apart from the insecurity of their perch already mentioned, they are shelterless, and it has been raining hard and unintermittently for about seven hours. Swathed in theoretical waterproofs – for no waterproof displays a practical side when put to such a test – they grovel upon the lumpy and uneven surface of the sacks, jolted, shaken, bruised, the beat of the rain in their faces, varied from time to time by a copious splash of rich, red liquid mud – lately dust – thrown up from the road. All are wet, cramped and uncomfortable; sore and aching from the jolting and constrained position.

Of this luckless trio, one is a female. Another is a small wiry-looking, stolid-faced man, who might be a farmer or a transport rider, and is very likely both. The third is our newly formed acquaintance, Roden Musgrave.

We have referred to three occupants of this luxurious vehicle. It boasted a fourth. He, however, was not in like pitiable case. He was the proud occupier of a seat – a tolerably secure one. Likewise was he able to indulge in the use of his limbs, and occasional strong language – this, however, in subdued tone, in deference to the presence of the lady passenger – untrammelled by the dire necessity of clinging on for dear life. He was, in fact, the driver. To him the colonial-born passenger:

"How are our chances of getting through the drift to-night, Henry? The river must be rolling yards high."

"Chances!" echoed the man – a stalwart fellow whose yellowish skin betrayed just a strain of native blood, notwithstanding his ruddy and slightly grizzled beard. "Chances? Ha-ha! No chance at all – no damn chance. There's nothing to keep you from going *over* it though."

"How are we going to poll that off?" struck in Roden.

"There's a very good box. Swing you across in no time," replied the driver, with a grin, and a wink at the colonial man.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed the lady passenger, showing a very white face beneath the hood of her mackintosh. "I'll never be able to do it. Those horrible boxes! I know them."

"You've got to do it, Missis, or stay this side!" returned the driver, with a fiendish grin.

And now as the cart crests another rise, a dull rumbling sound is audible through splash of hoof and wheel, which, as they draw nearer, breaks into a booming roar. It is the voice of the swollen river. The clouds hang low above the scrub, lying, an opaque veil, against the slopes of the opposite heights; and ever, without a break, the rain falls steadily down. The colonial man has managed to light a pipe, and, with characteristic philosophy, smokes steadily and uncomplainingly; an example Roden Musgrave would fain follow, but that he finds his fair companion in adversity literally such a handful, that he cannot even get at his pipe, let alone fill and light it: the fact being that

he is obliged to devote all his energies to holding the latter on her perch, for so exhausted is the poor thing with fatigue and discomfort that, were it not for his support, her insecure place would promptly know her no more.

Another rise is topped, and now the river-bed lies before and beneath them; and in truth the spectacle is enough to make the heart of the timid or inexperienced traveller feel somewhat small. The stream is indeed rolling yards high – a red, turbid flood coursing along some fifty feet below, in the bottom of its bed – rearing its mighty masses up in great hissing, crashing waves, rolling over tree-trunks and all kinds of driftwood, with here and there a drowned bullock, whose branching horns and ghastly staring eyes leap weirdly into view, immediately to be drawn in and sucked under by the flood. And this wild, roaring, seething horror – this crashing resistless current whose thunderous voice alone is deafening, appalling – has to be crossed somehow.

"Nay, what! Can't even swim the horses through that!" says the driver, Henry, as he descends from his seat, while a couple of Hottentot boys, who have emerged from a squalid shanty by the roadside, are busy outspanning. "We shall have to send over passengers and mails in the box."

"Oh heavens!" faintly ejaculates the distressed fair one; "I can never do it!"

"Oh yes you can!" says Roden, who has assisted her to alight. "It's perfectly safe if you sit still and keep your head. Don't be in the least afraid; I'll see you across all right."

She gives him a grateful glance, and answers that she will try. Seen as she stands up she is a good-looking woman of about thirty, with light brown hair and blue eyes. She is rather above the middle height, and there is a piteous look in her white and travel-worn face, half expressive of a consciousness of looking her worst, half of the mingled apprehension and discomfort born of the situation.

"Go on up to the box, lady and gentlemen," says Henry, the post driver. "I'll bring along your traps, and send 'em over with the mail-bags."

Roden recognises that if he is to get his charge, for such she has now become, to cross at all, the less time she has to think about it the better; wherefore he seconds this proposition, and accordingly they get under way.

The bed of the river is some sixty feet deep by nearly twice that distance in width, and, like that of most South African streams, in ordinary weather is threaded by a comparative trickle. Such rivers, however, after a few hours of heavy rain, or even one of those deluging thunder showers which are at certain times of the year of frequent and momentous occurrence, are wont to roll down in a furious, raging flood, and that with scant warning, if any; and now the bottom of this one is covered with at least ten feet of foaming, swirling water, coming down with a velocity and power against which the strongest of swimmers would stand not the ghost of a chance.

High in mid-air, looking like the mere gossamer thread of a

spider's web spanning the abyss, is a rope of galvanised iron, and swung on this, dependent on a couple of pulleys, is the "box." It is literally a box, a low-sided, flat concern, seven feet long, and just wide enough for a human being to sit in, and when it is remembered that occupants of this, for it will carry two at a time, are under the strictest necessity of keeping carefully in the centre, under pain of capsizal, and must also lower their heads to avoid the rope, it follows that, to a nervous person, the process of being swung out over a very abyss of boiling, seething waters, and gradually hauled across to the other side, is an ordeal which verges upon the terrific. And, as if to enhance the effect, the spot chosen for this particular apparatus to be hung is the highest point of the steep, well-nigh precipitous bank; the real reason being, of course, that such point is the clearest from which to work it.

"I had better take the lady across first," suggests Roden to his other travelling companion. The latter nods, and proceeds to fill a fresh pipe with the utmost unconcern, an example followed by a brace of stolid-faced Boer transport-riders, who stand watching the proceeding with characteristic phlegm. Two grinning Kaffirs stand prepared to work the rope.

But at sight of the rolling flood, whirling its load of tree-trunks and driftwood right beneath her feet, the frightened woman utters a piteous cry and draws back. She would rather wait for days, she protests, than be swung in mid-air over that horrible river. What if anything were to give way; what if the box or even the iron rope were to break, for instance! "There isn't a chance of

anything of the sort," urges her self-constituted protector; "I've been over far shakier concerns than this. Come now, jump in. We have only to sit opposite each other, and talk, and they'll have us over in a twinkling. Only be careful and sit well in the middle, and keep perfectly still."

He makes as though he would help her in, but she shrinks back in terror, then turns a wild stare upon him and upon the river, then sways, staggers, and would fall but that he has caught her. She has swooned.

"Now, mister, now's your time," says the other man. "If you feel equal to taking her across, now's the time to do it. Don't try to bring her round. She'll go easier that way."

The idea is a good one. Roden, prompt to act, takes his seat in the "box," which is drawn up upon the bank, and the post driver having now come up, the two men raise the limp form of the unconscious woman, and place it so that she lies, her head and back resting against him as though they were tobogganing. In this attitude he has her under perfect control, even should she regain consciousness during the transit.

"Ready!" he says. "Lower away now!"

Their shout having met with a response on the other side, the two Kaffirs carefully launch the box, and, with a whirring, creaking accompaniment of the pulleys, down it goes, to stop suddenly as it reaches the utmost droop of the iron cord on which it runs. Then those on the other side start hauling, and slowly and laboriously it ascends. Still Roden's charge remains blissfully

unconscious. Ten yards – five – the bank is nearly reached – when – there is a snap, a jerk; and with a suddenness and velocity which nearly overbalances it, away goes the thing back again over the centre of the stream. The hauling line has given way. The box with its human freight hangs helplessly over the seething, roaring abyss.

The volley of curses attendant upon this mishap having subsided, those on the further bank are heard in loud discussion as to what shall be done next. The simplest plan will be to haul the box back again, but Roden does not want this. Having embarked on the enterprise, he feels an obligation to carry it through; and then as the situation strikes him, he laughs queerly over the absurdity and unexpectedness of the same. Here he is, swung in mid-air like a bale of goods in a crate, hanging above a furious torrent, supporting the unconscious form of a fair stranger, who leans against him as heavily as if she belonged to him. Yes, the situation is ridiculous, and supremely uncomfortable; for he is cramped and dead tired, and it is beginning to get dark.

"Heave a fresh line!" he shouts. "I'll catch it if you throw straight."

"All right, mister," answers the voice from the bank. "But you be darn careful not to move from the middle. Now —*Pas op*!"

The line whistles out into the air. Roden, keeping a careful watch upon his balance, catches it deftly, for it has been noosed. Then, planting his feet firmly against the end plank, to do which necessitates that he shall lie almost flat and still preserve the

balance both of himself and his charge, he shouts to them to haul away.

In vain. In his constrained position he cannot support the tension. It is a case of letting go or being dragged bodily from the receptacle. So he sings out to them to slacken out again, and the box drops back to the centre of the iron rope. The only thing to be done now is to be hauled back, where those on the bank he has just left can fasten the line securely to its bolt.

No sooner is this done than his charge shows signs of returning consciousness.

"Where am I?" she ejaculates, wildly striving to sit up, an effort which, did he not forcibly repress, would result in their prompt capsizal.

"Sit still! sit still! We shall be across directly!" he says.

But as the box shoots down and dangles motionless for a moment above the centre of the flood, then moves forward in jerky tugs as it is hauled to the opposite side, the terrified woman gives vent to a series of hysterical shrieks, struggling wildly to tear herself from his grasp, so utterly lost are all her capabilities of reason in the mad frenzy of her terror. It is a perilous moment, for now darkness has set in, and the bellowing, seething rush of the great flood adds an indescribable element of horror to the situation.

"Sit still, and don't be so idiotically foolish. Do you hear?" he shouts angrily into her ear as he realises that her frantic struggles almost succeed. "You are perfectly safe; but if you go on at this

rate you will upset us both."

The loud, almost brutal tone is entirely successful. It turns her thoughts into a new channel, and seems to quiet her. Then, before she has time to relapse, the bank is reached, and the box, grasped by half-a-dozen pairs of hands, is dragged up into safety.

"Better take her up to the hotel, mister," says one of the men who is working the box apparatus.

The whitewashed walls of a house standing back from the river bank some two hundred yards are just visible above the low mimosa bushes. It is a roadside inn, and thither Roden half leads, half carries, his fainting charge. She, it turns out, is known to the landlady, to whom, nothing loth, Roden now consigns her, and hurries back to witness the crossing of the others. The colonial man is the first to arrive, half-buried in mail-bags, and smoking his pipe as philosophically as ever. Then the inanimate contents of the cart being sent over, Henry, the driver, follows.

"Well, gentlemen," is the first thing he says. "Better get dinner as soon as possible. We must start soon as the new cart's inspanned."

"The devil!" says Roden. "Why, it's going to be the beastliest night on record."

"Can't help that; I've got to get on, or get the sack. So on it is."

"But the lady! She won't be fit to travel as soon as that."

"Can't help that either, mister. If she can't travel she must stay here. I can't wait for nobody."

And so eventually it turns out. On reaching the hotel they find

that their fellow-traveller is unable to proceed. They find, too, that she is known to the people who run the place, and will be well cared for. So Roden and the colonial man, having got outside a good dinner and a few glasses of grog, take their places in the new cart which has been inspanned – now more comfortable, for some of the mail-bags have been got rid of here, and with a crack of the driver's whip, away they go careering into the night, under the pitiless pelting rain – to meet with more adventures and mishaps or not, according as luck befriends them. For luck has a great deal to say to the safety, or otherwise, of post-cart travellers in South Africa.

Chapter Three.
Peter Van Stolz, R.M

"Before Peter Van Stolz, Esq., R.M., Gonjana, a Tambookie Kaffir, charged with stealing one sheep, the property of his master, Charles Suffield, farmer," scribbles the reporter of the *Doppersdorp Flag*, who indeed is proprietor, editor, reporter, and comp., all rolled into one.

The Doppersdorp Court-house is a large and spacious room. The "bench" is represented by a green baize-covered table upon a raised daïs, a similar table beneath providing accommodation for the clerk. In front of this again, and facing the bench, a couple of rows of desks accommodate the men of law and their clients, and a few forms, the usual contingent of loungers behind. The witness-box stands on the left of the Bench, and on the right the dock. This latter is now occupied by a thick-set, forbidding-looking Kaffir, clad in a pair of ragged moleskins and a very dirty shirt.

Roden Musgrave, who occupies the clerk's table, is reading out the legal rigmarole which constitutes the indictment. This is interpreted in few words to the prisoner by a native constable standing beside the dock. Asked to plead Guilty or Not Guilty, he merely shrugs his shoulders, and says he doesn't know anything about the matter.

"Enter it as a plea of Not Guilty, Mr Musgrave," says the magistrate, in an undertone. Then aloud, "Does any one appear for him? Has he got a lawyer, Jan?"

Jan Kat, the native constable aforesaid, puts the question. The prisoner answers voluminously, and gazes towards the door.

"He says he has, sir. Mr Darrell appears for him."

"Then why isn't Mr Darrell here?" says the Bench shortly. "Call the prosecutor."

The latter steps into the witness-box – a tall, fair-bearded man with a pleasant face. He deposes that his name is Charles Suffield, that he is a farmer residing at Quaggasfontein in that district – all of which every one there present knows as well as he does – that the prisoner is in his service as herd – which they do not know – and then there is an interruption, as a black-coated individual with a bundle of blue papers and a portentous-looking law book or two, bustles into the front row of desks and announces that he is instructed to appear for the accused.

Mr Van Stolz, the Resident Magistrate, is the most genial and kind-hearted of men, but he is touchy on one point – a sense of the respect due to the dignity of his court. And rightly so, bearing in mind the casual, happy-go-lucky, let-things-slide tendency of the dwellers in Doppersdorp, and like places.

"The case has already begun, Mr Darrell," he says shortly. "Did you instruct the prisoner to plead guilty?"

The attorney starts, then asks rather anxiously —

"Has he pleaded guilty, your worship?"

"No, he hasn't; but he was left, in the lurch as far as his legal adviser was concerned," retorts the Bench, with rather a cruel emphasis on the word "legal," for the practitioners at Doppersdorp are not precisely shining lights in their profession.

An appreciative chuckle from the audience, started by a professional rival, greets this sally, and the Bench, mollified, accepts graciously the defaulting attorney's excuses.

Then the prosecutor goes on to describe how he had been riding round his farm on such and such a day, and had come upon the prisoner's flock left to itself. Instead of shouting for the missing herd he had searched cautiously for him, suspecting he was up to mischief of some sort. Then he had lit upon traces of blood, and following them he came to a spot where a sheep had recently been killed, amid a clump of mimosa. There were footmarks around, which he traced to some rocks hard by, and there he found the meat, roughly quartered, hidden in a cleft. It was quite fresh, and must have been deposited there that day. As he left the place he saw somebody lying behind a low bush watching him, but pretended not to notice. Shortly afterwards, as he returned to where the flock was left, the accused came hurrying up. He accounted for his absence by a cock-and-bull story, that he had seen a jackal skulking near the sheep, and bad gone after it to drive it away. Witness pretended to believe this tale, but as he was listening he noticed two splashes of blood on the prisoner's leg. He evinced no suspicion whatever, but on reaching home sent off at once for the District Police. When the

sheep were counted in that night one was missing. The prisoner's hut was searched that night, and the skin was found, hidden among a lot of blankets. It was quite fresh, and must have been flayed off that day. He could swear that, and could swear to the skin. He produced it in court. It bore his mark – an "S" reversed. On the discovery of the skin Gonjana was arrested. The value of the sheep was about 1 pound.

The prisoner's attorney, who all this time has been taking copious notes or pretending to, jumps up to cross-examine. But little enough change can he get out of the witness, whose statement is clear enough, nor does anybody expect he will, least of all himself. As for the man he saw lying behind the bush watching him, the prosecutor cannot absolutely swear it was Gonjana, but he is certain of it short of that. The spoor was the spoor of one man. He is accustomed to follow spoor – has been all his life; he is certain, too, that no other people were in the neighbourhood. He did not analyse the blood spots on the prisoner's leg – they *might* have been pig's blood, as Mr Darrell so sagely suggests, there being hardly such a thing as a pig in the whole district of Doppersdorp – but they were blood spots anyhow; that he can swear. Why should the skin found in the prisoner's hut have been brought home and not the meat? Well, skins were negotiable at some canteens, and natives were fond of grog. He made no allegations against any canteen keeper in the district, he merely answered the question. Gonjana had been with him about a year, and twice he had suspected him of killing sheep

before. In other respects his behaviour was far from satisfactory. Why did he keep him in his service? Well, servants were scarce just then, and good ones scarcer still. He employed a bad one, as some people employ an attorney – as a necessary evil.

Amid a great splutter of mirth Mr Darrell appeals vehemently to the Bench to protect him against the insults of the witness, but there is a twinkle in his eye and a half-suppressed grin on his face as he does so.

"Any more questions?"

"No."

So the prosecutor steps down, and is replaced by the police sergeant, who deposes to the finding of the skin and the arrest of the prisoner. The latter made no remark except that he supposed some one must have put it there, as he knew nothing about it. This witness is not cross-examined.

No evidence has Mr Darrell to call. But he draws a pathetic picture of his unfortunate client, wrongfully accused – mistakenly rather, for nobody who knows Mr Suffield would suspect him of wilfully making a false accusation. This unfortunate man then – the very nature of whose work obliges him to be alone in the lonely veldt, cannot of course call any rebutting evidence, cannot prove an *alibi*– is being victimised by the real culprit, but would rather take the punishment upon himself than inform against the real culprit; and so on, and so on. The while Gonjana, standing nonchalantly in the dock, is marvelling at the stupendous idiocy of the white man, who can

take up all that time determining the plainest and clearest proofs of his guilt. And the Bench shares in substance his opinion.

"This case," says the Bench, "is as plain as the nose on one's face. Mr Darrell has made the best of a bad job on behalf of his client, but even he could hardly be sanguine enough to expect to succeed. Tell him I find him guilty," concludes the magistrate. And the constable interprets accordingly.

"What is he saying?" as the man is vehemently muttering something.

"He say, sir, nobody see him kill dat sheep."

"Of course not. If every crime had to be seen by an eye-witness, how many criminals would be convicted at all? Has he the means of paying a fine? It will make a difference in his sentence."

"Yes, sir. He say he has one cow and fifteen sheep and goats."

This statement having been corroborated by the prosecutor, the Bench goes on: —

"If he had possessed no means I had intended giving him the heaviest sentence in my power, namely, a year's imprisonment with hard-labour. Stock-stealing has assumed alarming proportions of late, and I am determined to check it in this district, by making an example of every offender. As it is, I sentence Gonjana to pay a fine of 4 pounds, to pay Mr Suffield 1 pound, the value of the sheep, and to receive twenty-five lashes with the 'cat.' Call on the next case."

Kaffirs are stoical folk. This one's expression of countenance

undergoes no change, nor does he make any remark as, his sentence having been interpreted to him, he shambles down from the dock to take his seat on the prisoners' bench until the rising of the court. His place is taken by a fellow-countryman, who is charged with contravening the Masters and Servants Act by refusing to obey the lawful commands of his master, Petrus Jacobus Botha.

The latter, an unkempt, corduroy-clad Dutchman, ascends the witness-box, and, placing his greasy slouch hat on the rail, spits on the floor two or three times, Sartly from nervousness, partly from sheer force of habit; then he takes the oath, unctuously and with right hand uplifted, as the manner of his countrymen is. He, too, is a farmer, and the accused native is a herd. The facts of the case are soon got at, and resolve themselves into a matter of "six of one, and half a dozen of the other." The accused has no legal representative, but Mr Van Stolz holds the scale of justice with rigid evenness. He listens to the statements of all parties with infinite patience, and, having given the prosecutor a little of his mind, he summarily dismisses the case, with the metaphor that "people should come into court with clean hands, which is just what the prosecutor has not done"; a remark which evolves a laugh from two or three who grasp the humour underlying it.

Two Hottentot women, old offenders, are sent to gaol for a week for lying drunk about the streets, and then the civil business begins. This consists of a series of unimportant cases, mostly recovery suits, which are soon disposed of; and by one o'clock

the court work is over for the day.

"Well, Musgrave," says the little magistrate, as he and his new clerk stroll down the street together towards their respective dinners. "You are getting quite into the swim of things, considering you have only been at it ten days."

"If I am, Mr Van Stolz, it's thanks to the kindness and patience you have shown to an utterly inexperienced hand, in teaching him what to do, and how to do it."

"Oh, no one can be expected to know all about a thing by instinct. Some men expect absurdities. A new clerk is appointed to them who knows nothing whatever of his work, naturally, and they don't give him a chance to learn. They expect him to have everything at his fingers' ends the day he joins the Service, as much as if he had twenty years of it at his back. It isn't fair on a young fellow; though by the way, you're not a young fellow either, Musgrave. Some men at your age are already Civil Commissioners."

The remark, though made in perfect innocence, and with no ulterior thought whatever, was one of those which caused the hearer to shrink imperceptibly into his shell. Though he had been ten days in the place, not a soul in Doppersdorp knew a thing about him, beyond that he was entirely new to the Service. It was a rare thing for a man of his age to start in this, and at the salary of a youngster. It was a rare thing, too, in a place like Doppersdorp, for a man's private affairs to be so thoroughly a sealed book; there where everybody knew as much about his neighbour's concerns

as he did about his own, ofttimes a great deal more.

"I've always got on well with my clerks," pursues Mr Van Stolz, "except one, and I worked the oracle so as to get him changed; but, with that exception, they have always been sorry to leave me, even when it meant promotion."

The boast is a very pardonable one because true. The man who could not get on well with Peter Van Stolz could get on with nobody. An excellent official, he was the most genial and unassuming of men, and with such of his subordinates as were gentlemen he was more like a comrade than an official chief. They were all fellow Civil Servants, and he held that there should be a strong *esprit de corps* among such. Himself of Dutch extraction, he was the right man in the right place, in charge of a district ninety per cent, of whose population consisted of Boers. He was deservedly popular, for he held the scale evenly between all parties and all nationalities, whether Boers, natives, or British, and in his judicial capacities, wherever it was possible with due regard to strict justice to err on the side of indulgence, he was sure to do so. In outward aspect he was a little man, sturdy and well knit withal, extremely brisk in his movements, yet not in the least fussy; indeed, such briskness seemed to express in itself his expansive and fun-loving nature, and when a joke or a good story was to the fore, no laugh was more spontaneous or heartier than his.

Their ways part here, and they separate. Roden, as he strolls down towards the hotel where he has for the present taken up

his quarters, recalls the verdict which had irresistibly been forced upon his mind, as he had been rattled into the place in the ramshackle post-cart one hot and dusty afternoon ten days ago.

"Heavens! what a God-forsaken looking hole!" had been his unspoken utterance as he viewed for the first time the ugly, mean-looking town, and realised that this was to be his home for an indefinite period.

To say truth the aspect of Doppersdorp was calculated to impress nobody in its favour. It lay upon an open plain, shut in on three sides by bare and craggy mountains, and consisted at first sight mainly of a couple of hundred mud-coloured tenements looking like lumps of clay dropped upon the veldt and left to dry in the sun. It improved, however, on closer inspection. The streets were broad and well laid out, and bordered by willows – and on the lower side of the town were gardens, which made a pleasant oasis of green against the prevailing aridity. Some of the houses were double-storeyed, but the most prominent building of all was the Dutch Reformed Church, an appalling specimen of architecture, staringly new, and surmounted by a badly proportioned steeple. The inhabitants of this place were firmly under the impression that Doppersdorp was the most attractive, and nearly the most important, town in the world; which was a comfortable form of belief for themselves, if a bore to the new arrival, who was expected to acquiesce.

"What d'you think of Doppersdorp?" was fired into the said new arrival by every one with whom he was brought into

contact, socially or officially, unawares or with premeditation. And each individual querist would be sure to continue in a tone of complacency, which might convey the idea that it owed its attractiveness, if not its very existence, mainly to himself:

"Ah, it's not half a bad little place, Doppersdorp; not half a bad little place."

To which Roden Musgrave would agree, from the double-barrelled motive of expediency, and the needless exertion entailed by maintaining the contrary. His real opinion, like everything else, he held prudently in reserve.

Chapter Four.
Carte and Tierce!

"I wonder what the new magistrate's clerk is like!"

And the speaker who had been staring meditatively skyward, her hands locked together behind the coiled masses of her brown hair, raises her magnificent form from the hammock in which it has been luxuriously resting, and, sitting upright, stretches her arms and yawns. The hammock is slung beneath a group of green willows whose drooping boughs afford a cool and pleasant shade. Beyond, bordered by a low sod wall and a ditch, is a large garden planted with fruit trees soon to be weighed down with golden apricots and ripening peaches, albeit these are at present green. Over the tree-tops shimmers the corrugated iron roof of a house.

"It's awfully hot still, but not so hot as it was," continues the speaker. "Why, Grace, I do believe you're asleep!"

The other occupant of this cool retreat starts violently, nearly falling from her chair with the awakening. She is a tall, slightly built woman, some years older than the first speaker; good-looking, albeit with rather a faded and 'washed-out' air.

"Yes, I was; nodding, at any rate. What were you trying to say, Mona?"

"I was saying, 'I wonder what the new magistrate's clerk is like!'"

"Why didn't you go into Doppersdorp with Charlie this morning? Then you could have seen for yourself."

"Charlie would insist on starting at each an unholy hour. Charlie delights in turning me out at four o'clock if he can, and I am constitutionally lazy. Charlie is a barbarian."

"I wonder what Gonjana will get? A year, I hope. Mr Van Stolz has been heavily down upon sheep-stealing of late."

"Grace Suffield, I'm surprised at you! That's a most unchristian sentiment. You ought to be more merciful to the poor benighted heathen, who doesn't know any better."

"He's the worst 'boy' we have ever had on the place, and I for one shall be heartily glad to get rid of him."

"Bother Gonjana! I was talking of the new magistrate's clerk, 'Roden Musgrave!' It has quite a romantic sound, hasn't it?"

"Romantic fiddlestick!" laughs Mrs Suffield. "You're not in luck's way this time, Mona. They say he isn't young, and is awfully reserved and stiff; quite a middle-aged fogey, in fact."

"Not young, eh! That makes him the more interesting, if only for a change. I believe I'm beginning to have enough of boys."

"Oh, poor Mr Watkins! Why, Mona, I believe you were more than half engaged to that poor boy, and now you are preparing to throw him over for his successor."

"Poor fellow, he was rather fond of me!" is the complacent rejoinder. "I don't know that I ever saw any of them so cut up as he was when he said good-bye. But, look here, Gracie. He is no older than am, and has only been a couple of years in the Service!

What sort of aged and wrinkled hag shall I be by the time he gets even a third-class magistracy?"

"Quite so. And having broken his heart – done your best to I should say, for hearts don't break at young Watkins' age – you are going to set to work to subjugate his successor."

"What is life worth without its little excitements?" is the soft, purring reply; but no attempt does the speaker make to repudiate the imputation.

"Little excitements, indeed! Did you ever try and count the number of men you have made fools of? Let's begin. There was young Watkins here; the new doctor at Villiersdorp; then there was that man on board ship – two rather – for I hear you were playing off one against the other. And while you were in England – "

"Oh, that'll do, that'll do! I didn't make fools of them. They made fools of themselves."

"You'll do it once too often one of these days. You'll end by singeing your own wings, and that when you least expect it. And when you do it'll be a scorcher, my child – a scorcher, mark my words."

"I don't know that I'd mind that. I believe I should positively enjoy it. Such an experience would be delicious."

"Wait until it comes, Mona, and then tell me how 'enjoyable,' how 'delicious' you find it," is the reply, given rather shortly, and, it might be thought, with a dash of bitterness.

But Mona Ridsdale says nothing as she slides from her

hammock, and, standing upright, stretches her magnificent limbs and again yawns. Looked at now she is seen to be a splendidly developed, and perfectly proportioned specimen of womanhood: whose lines the fall throat and bust, the symmetrical curves of the waist, and the swelling, rounded hips, show faultless in the lithe, natural grace of her attitude. The face, however, is a puzzling one, for its upper and lower parts are contradictory. The higher aspirations, a great capacity for tenderness, and the better and nobler qualities suggested in the broad, smooth brow and melting hazel eyes, are negatived by the setting of the lower jaw and the straight compression of the lips, which convey the idea of a hardness of purpose – when purpose runs on the same lines as inclination – a recklessness of consequence, self-will, ruthlessness. The effect of these contradictions is not a little curious, and is calculated to draw from the observer of character a mingled verdict, to convey an uncomfortable impression of unreliability. It is a face which has just missed being beautiful, and, as it is, can become wondrously attractive; as, judging from the foregoing conversation, some must already have discovered, to their cost.

"Why, I believe Charlie has come back!" cries Mrs Suffield, rising to her feet. "What a noise the dogs are making. Yes, it is him," as a male voice is heard, pacifying those faithful, if uproarious, guardians. Then its tones are mingled with those of another; and they are approaching. "Who on earth has he got with him?" she continues.

Two men appear among the fruit trees, and, getting over the low sod wall, now come up.

"Hallo, Grace!" cries the foremost. "Thought we'd find you and Mona lazing somewhere, so instinctively made for the coolest spot. I've brought you a visitor. This is Mr Musgrave, Watkins' successor."

The effect upon Grace Suffield of this introduction is strange – to the two witnesses thereof inexplicable. Quite a rush of colour comes into her ordinarily pale face, and there is the trepidation of suppressed eagerness in her manner.

"Well, this is an unexpected pleasure! I *am* glad to see you, Mr Musgrave." Then, turning to her mystified husband, "Charlie, this is the gentleman who was so kind to me during that awful post-cart journey. That horrible river – ugh!" with a shudder.

"The deuce it is! Then, Musgrave, you must accept my best thanks, and a thousand per cent, more of hearty welcome," says Suffield. "My wife swears her days would have been numbered but for you. She has done nothing but talk of your kindness to her ever since."

"That's a pity, because it's making a great deal out of very little," is Roden's reply. "But I am very glad we have met again, Mrs Suffield. I often wondered how you had got on after your scare and hardships in general."

"And you neither of you knew each other's names!" says Suffield. "That reminds me, I haven't completed the introduction. My cousin, Miss Ridsdale."

And then these two stand mentally appraising each other in one quick, searching glance, while their hands meet, and, as though conveyed in the magnetism of the touch, very much the same idea runs through the mind of each, – namely, that between this their first meeting, and the eventual and final parting, lie grave and boundless potentialities.

A little more desultory talk, and a move is made towards the house, and Suffield, owning to a magnificent drought after their eight-mile ride in the sun, produces a bottle of grog; then presently, excusing a temporary absence on the ground of it being time to count in the stock, departs, for the sun is touching the craggy heights which bound the view on every side; and already, over the bare treeless plains stretching away for miles in front of the house, are moving white patches, the flocks returning to their nightly fold.

As he disappears so does his wife, for the uproar and occasional howl emanating from an adjacent nursery seem to require her presence. Mona Ridsdale thus left to entertain the stranger, fails to do so, unless as a dumb show, for she is standing at the open window in silence, gazing meditatively out over the veldt, her splendid figure outlined against the blushing glow of the sunset sky. A hostile witness might even have insinuated that she was "posing."

"Well, Mr Musgrave," she says at length, alive to the necessity of saying something, "how do you think you will like Doppersdorp?"

"Ah! Now that is something like a rational version of the question I am by this time prepared to answer, from sheer force of habit before it is asked, wherever I make a new acquaintance. The stereotyped form is, 'How do you like Doppersdorp?' not how do I think I will. Now, between ourselves, I *don't* like it at present, I don't say I never shall, but so far I don't. I don't say I dislike it, for both sentiments are too active to define my views towards it. I simply make the best of the place. And you, do you live here always?"

"Oh yes. This is my home. Charlie and Grace are the only relatives I can at all get on with, and we pull very well together."

"Well, and how do *you* like Doppersdorp? It is a refreshing novelty to be able to ask the question instead of answering it."

"My answer is the same as yours. I make the best of it."

"Ah! You are not very long back from England?"

"About a year. But – how on earth did you know that! Did Charlie tell you?"

"Not a word. I deduced it. There was a discontented ring about your tone, and colonial girls always take on discontent after a visit to England, whereas men are glad to get back."

"Now, what can you possibly know about colonial girls, Mr Musgrave, you, who are only just out from England yourself?"

He smiles slightly, and does not attempt to answer this question.

"How old are you?" he says at length.

Mona favours him with an astonished stare, and colours a

little. She does not know whether to laugh or to be angry, to answer or to snub him; and in fact, such a question from a perfect stranger would amply justify the latter course. But she only says —

"Guess."

"Twenty-four."

"Oh, Charlie told you, or somebody did."

"Upon my honour they didn't. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"H'm! A discontented age. Everybody is discontented at twenty-four. But you – well, at whatever age, you always will be."

"You are not a flattering prophet, I doubt if you are a true one."

"Time will show."

"You seem great at drawing deductions and wonderfully confident in their accuracy."

"Perhaps. Human beings are like books; some are made to be read, while others are made apparently to serve no purpose whatever. But all *can* be read."

"And I?"

"A very open page. As, for instance, at this moment, the subject of your thoughts is my unworthy self. You are speculating how at my time of life I come to take up a berth usually occupied by raw youngsters, and mystifying yourself over my record in general; though, womanlike, you are going to deny it."

"No I am not. There! Womanlike, I am going to do the

unexpected, and prove you no true prophet as to the latter statement. That is exactly what I was thinking."

"Hallo, Musgrave! Is Mona beginning to give you beans already?" says Suffield, who re-enters, having returned from his farm duties. "Grace, where are you?" he proceeds to shout. "Hurry up! It's feeding time." And then they all adjourn to another room, where the table is laid, and the party is augmented by a brace of tow-headed youngsters, of eleven and twelve respectively, who devote their energies to making themselves a nuisance all round, as is the manner of their kind if allowed to run wild, finishing up with a bear-fight among themselves on the floor, after which they are packed off to bed – a process effected, like the traditional Scotch editor's grasp of the joke, with difficulty.

"And now, Mr Musgrave," says the latter's hostess, when quiet is restored, "you haven't told me yet. How do you like – "

"Stop there, Grace," cries Mona. "Mr Musgrave has just been bewailing his fate, in that he is condemned to answer that question the same number of times there are inhabitants of Doppersdorp, that is to say, about four hundred. And now you are the four hundred and first. In fact, he now answers before the question is asked, from sheer force of habit."

"Ha, ha!" laughs Suffield. "Now you mention it, the thing must become a first-class bore, especially as you're expected to answer every time that you think it a paradise, on pain of making a lifelong enemy. Now, for my part, I'd rather hang

myself than have to live in Doppersdorp. As a deadly lively, utterly insignificant hole, there can be few to beat it among our most one-horse townships. And the best of the joke is that its inhabitants think it about as important as London."

"Your verdict is refreshing, Suffield; nor does it inspire me with wild surprise, unless by reason of its complete novelty," rejoins Roden. "But, however true, I don't find its adoption for public use warranted upon any ground of expediency."

"Where are you staying, Mr Musgrave?" asks Mona.

"At the Barkly, for the present. I went to it because it was the first I came to, and I felt convinced there was no choice."

"Do they make you comfortable there?"

"H'm! Comfort, like most things in this world, is relative. Some people might discover a high degree of comfort in being stabled in a three-bedded room with a travelling showman, the proud proprietor of a snore which is a cross between a prolonged railway whistle and the discharge of a Gatling; and farther, who is given to anointing a profuse endowment of ruddy locks with cosmetics, nauseous in odour and of sticky consistency, and is not careful to distinguish between his own hair brash and that of his neighbours. Some people, I repeat, might find this state of things fairly comfortable. I can only say that my philosophy does not attain to such heights."

"Rather not," says Suffield. "Jones is a decent fellow in his way, but he's no more fit to run an hotel than I am to repair a church organ. How do you find his table, Musgrave?"

"I find it simply deplorable. A medley of ancient bones, painted yellow, and aqueous rice, may be *called* curry, but it constitutes too great an inroad upon one's stock of faith to accept it as such. Again, that delectable dish, termed at The Barkly 'head and feet,' seems to me to consist of the refuse portions of a goat slain the week before last, and when it appears through one door I have to battle with a powerful yearning to disappear through the other. No – I am not more particular than most people, nor do I bear any ill-will towards Jones, but really the catering in a *posada*, on the southern slope of the Pyrenees is sumptuous in comparison with his."

"Yes, it's beastly bad," assents Suffield. "Every one growls, but then there's no competition. The other shop's no better. Why don't you get some quarters of your own, Musgrave – even if you do go on feeding at Jones'? You'd be far more comfortable."

"I have that in contemplation. Is there a moon to-night, by the way, Suffield? I don't want to ride into any *sluits* or to get 'turned round' in the veldt."

"Moon! You've no use for any moon to-night. You've got to wait till to-morrow for that ride back. You'll be in ample time for court at ten, or earlier if you like. It's only eight miles."

A chorus of protest arising on all hands, Roden allows himself to be persuaded, and they promptly adjourn to pipes, and re-try the case of Gonjana, and agree that that bold robber obtained no more than his full deserts. Then the eventful post-cart journey is brought up, and Grace Suffield says —

"I should never have believed you were only a newly arrived Englishman, Mr Musgrave. Why, you seemed to know your way about on that awful night better than the other man who was with us, and he has never been outside the Colony."

"A 'raw' Englishman is the approved way of putting it, I believe," is the unconcerned reply. "Well, Mrs Suffield, you will hardly find such a thing now. Most of us have done some knocking about the world – I among others."

That is all. No explanation, no experiences volunteered. The natural curiosity of two at least among his hearers is doomed to disappointment. He does not even say in what part of the said world he has done the knocking about.

Two hours later Mrs Suffield goes to Mona's room for a final gossip.

"Well, dear. You were wondering what he was like! Now, what *is* he like?" she says.

"Tiresome! Unutterably tiresome!"

"Tiresome!" wonderingly. "Not a bore?"

"Oh no, not that. Only I can't make him out. But – I will. Oh yes, I will."

The speaker has her face half hidden in her splendid hair which she is brushing and otherwise arranging, and consequently does not see a queer look flit swiftly across the face of her friend.

"I told you he wasn't young, and was said to be very reserved," pursues the latter.

"Oh yes. A middle-aged fogey, you said."

Before she goes to sleep that night Mona Ridsdale lets her thoughts dwell to a very great extent upon the stranger guest; and for his part, the latter, but a few yards off, allows his thoughts to run very considerably upon her.

That he does so evolves a kind of feeling of self-pity pity not far removed from contempt, yet can he not help it. Beautiful, according to the accepted canons of beauty, she is not, he decides. But of far greater potency than the most faultlessly chiselled features, the classic profile, the ivory-and-roses complexion, which she does not possess, is a certain warm, irresistible power of attractiveness which she does possess, and that to a dangerous degree – the strong under-current of vitality pulsating beneath the dark-complexioned skin, the faultless grace of movement, the straight glance from beneath those clearly marked brows, the vast potentialities of passion that lurk within the swiftly playing eyes. None of this escaped him – all was summed up in the moment he stood face to face with her. In that moment he has read a faulty character, full of puzzling inconsistencies; one which attracts while it repels, yet attracts more than it repels, and it interests him. Nevertheless, the steel armoury of defence, forged by a life's strange experience, is around him. His mental attitude is that of one who is thoroughly "on guard."

Chapter Five.
Concerning Small Things

In due course of time – that is to say, from two to three weeks – Gonjana's sentence was confirmed by the Eastern Districts Court – such confirmation being required before a judgment involving lashes could be carried out.

"It's hard lines on the poor devils, Musgrave," observed Mr Van Stolz, as he received the confirmation. "Instead of getting their warming at once, and have done with it, they're kept in gaol for about three weeks, expecting it every day. It may be a necessary precaution with some magistrates, but I have never had a conviction quashed or a judgment upset. I don't say it to brag, but it's a fact. But – it's nearly twelve o'clock now. We'll go down and see it done."

The gaol at Doppersdorp was an oblong brick building containing ten cells. These formed three sides of a central courtyard, the fourth constituting the gaoler's quarters and the kitchen where the prisoners' rations were prepared. A line of men in broad-arrow stamped suits, all natives, guarded by two armed constables, was filing in from the veldt. This was the hard-labour gang, returning to the most congenial task in the whole twenty-four hours, the consumption of dinner, to wit; to-day combined with a scarcely less attractive one, to those figuring in it only as

spectators – punishment parade.

The convicts, after the regulation search, were drawn up in a line in the prison yard. A long ladder standing against the wall did duty as the triangles. There was another to suffer besides Gonjana, a yellow-skinned Hottentot named Bruintjes, and for a similar offence. Half beside himself with fear, this fellow stood, shivering and moaning, with quaking, disjointed appeals for mercy. The Kaffir, on the other hand, might have been one of the spectators, for all the sign he gave to the contrary; though now and again his tongue would go up to the roof of his month in a disdainful "click," as he watched the contortions of his fellow-sufferer.

"Which shall I take first, sir?" said the gaoler.

"Oh, the Hottentot," answered Mr Van Stolz. "The poor devil will be dead if he has to wait for the other chap. He isn't quite so cheeky now as he was in Court. Seems to be taken out of him. Ready, doctor?"

The district surgeon, whose presence on such occasions was required by law, replied in the affirmative, and the Hottentot, stripped to the waist, was triced to the ladder. With the first "swish" of the lash, which the gaoler, an old soldier, understood the use of, he set up a screech like a cat in a steel trap; and this he kept up throughout. At the end he was untied, whimpering and howling, and his back sponged.

"Pah! Twenty-five lashes!" growled the gaoler, running his fingers through the strings of his "cat." "A soldier would have

taken it grinning, in my time."

Then Gonjana was triced up. But he was made of very different stuff. A slight involuntary quiver in the muscles of the brawny chocolate-coloured back as the lash cut its terrible criss-cross, but that was all. Not a sound escaped the throat of the sturdy barbarian, not even a wriggle ran through his finely-modelled limbs from first to last. It was like flogging a bronze statue.

"By Jove, he took that well!" exclaimed Roden, moved to admiration.

The Kaffir, who had undergone the sponging as though he were merely being washed, had now huddled his ragged shirt upon his raw and bleeding back.

"He's a plucky fellow!" said Mr Van Stolz, going up to him. "Tell him, Jan, that it will pay him best to be honest in future. But he took his licking well. He can go now."

This the constable duly interpreted. But Gonjana seemed in no hurry to enter upon the sweets of his newly restored liberty. He stood looking at the magistrate with a queer, sidelong expression, his broad nostrils snuffing the air. Then he said something in his own language. The constable sniggered.

"He say, sir," interpreted the latter, "he say de lash hurt, but he not afraid of being hurt. He say, sir – he very hungry. He hope sir will not send him away without his dinner."

From the open windows of the prison kitchen the strong fumes of a savoury stew were wafted into the yard, for it was the dinner-

hour. The gaol ration of meat and mealies was a liberal one, and it was noteworthy that every convict who had completed his term of hard-labour came out of prison sleek and fat, whatever might have been his condition at the time of incarceration. Mr Van Stolz burst out laughing.

"Give the poor devil his dinner and let him go," he said. "He took his dose well. It's little enough dinner I'd want if I were in his shoes, eh, doctor?"

This to the district surgeon, who had joined them as they left the gaol. He was a young M.D. named Lambert, a new arrival, newer even than Roden, having been recently appointed. There was nothing specially remarkable about him, unless it were a species of brisk self-assertiveness which some might call bumptiousness, and which might not altogether be to his disadvantage in a place like Doppersdorp, where the District Surgeon was something of a personage, and apt to be toadied accordingly. But between him and Roden Musgrave there was an indefinable instinct of antipathy, which is perhaps best expressed in saying that they had not taken to each other.

This feeling being, for the present at any rate, merely a passive one, they found themselves strolling towards the Barkly Hotel together, Mr Van Stolz having left them. Two ladies were seated on the *stoep*, who as they drew near took the identity of Mrs Suffield and Mona Ridsdale.

"Well, Dr Lambert," said the latter, with a wicked look at Roden, when greetings had been exchanged; "and how do you

like Doppersdorp? But there, I forgot, I must not ask you that. Well then, what was the meaning of that dreadful noise we heard going on at the gaol just now, for we could hear it all the way from here?"

"Only a fellow getting a licking in due course of law – a Hottentot, for sheep-stealing," answered the doctor. "The other nigger took it like a man."

"Oh, how dreadful! And do you mean to say you went to see that?"

"I had to. You see I am compelled to be present on such occasions," answered Lambert; with a stress on the pronoun, as if to convey the idea that the other was not, which, strictly speaking, was the case.

"What horrid creatures men are!"

"I agree; they are," said Roden. "The remark is made so often that it must be true."

Then he went indoors, and Mona, thus deprived of all opportunity of reply, did not know whether to feel angry or not. For these two had seen something of each other daring the three weeks which had elapsed since Roden's first visit to the Suffields. In fact, there were not lacking ill-natured people, who declared that Mona had got a new string to her bow, or rather, a new bow to a very well-worn string.

The young doctor, however, who had met her once before, had, for his part, been very much struck at first sight, as was the wont of Mona's admirers: they were apt to cool off later, but that

was her fault.

Now being left with the coast clear, Lambert laid himself out to be excessively agreeable, and the bell having rung, hurried them in to dinner, in order to secure the seat next to Mona before the objectionable Musgrave should reappear. But the latter did not seem to care two straws, when he came in presently with Suffield, whom he had picked up in the bar.

"So he took it well, did he?" that worthy was saying as they sat down. "Gonjana is a good bit of a *schelm*, but Kaffirs are generally plucky. Talking of that, there's rumour of a scare in the Transkei."

"There always is a scare in the Transkei," struck in Jones, the landlord, who was carving.

"Well, scare or no scare, it wouldn't affect us much," said Suffield.

"Oh, wouldn't it? I don't know so much about that. There's them Tambookie locations out Wildschutsberg way; they're near enough to make it lively, I imagine."

"That's where you get your best custom from, eh, Jones? They'll come to you first, if only that they know the way to your grog. What's this, eh? Not mutton. Buck, isn't it?"

"Yes, rhybok. Mr Musgrave shot it yesterday morning."

"So! Where did you go, Musgrave?"

"As nearly as possible on your own place, Suffield," said Roden, starting, for he had been in something like a brown study. "You know that big double *krantz* you see from the road? Well,

just under that."

"Why didn't you come and look us up, man?"

"Hadn't time. You see, I have to turn out almost in the middle of the night to get among the rocks by the time it's light enough to shoot; rhybok are precious leery. Then I've got to be back early, too, so as to be at the office by half-past nine."

"I didn't know you were such a Nimrod," said Mrs Suffield.

"He brings back a buck every time he goes out," said Jones. "Piet Van der Merwe was here the other day fuming because some one had been shooting on his farm; but when I told him who it was, he said he didn't mind, because no Englishman could hit a haystack if he were a yard away from it. He told Mr Musgrave he could go there whenever he liked, and I expect soon there won't be a buck left on the place."

"If I were Musgrave, I should make you take me at half-price, on the strength of keeping your larder supplied, Jones," laughed Suffield. "We must get up a day's shoot, though. Doctor, are you keen on shooting?"

The doctor replied that he was, and then followed much discussion as to when a good long day could be arranged.

"Why not come out with us this afternoon?" proposed Suffield. "We could get away upon the *berg* by sundown, and perhaps pick up a buck or two."

"Can't do it, unfortunately," said Roden. "Got to go back to office."

But the other accepted with alacrity, though it is I probable

that the venatorial side of the programme is not, if the truth were known, constitute the most attractive part. All the time they were at table he had been making the most of his opportunities, apparently to some purpose, for when they got up, and Mona declared she had some shopping to do, with her went Lambert in close attendance.

Although continuing to dine at Jones' dubious board, Roden had so far carried out his project that he had secured for himself a tiny red brick cottage, which boasted two rooms and a kitchen, with a back yard and stable. It was large enough for him, however, and he promptly proceeded to make himself comfortable therein, in a modest sort of way. Hither, having bidden good-bye to the Suffields, without waiting to see them inspan, he adjourned, and, in company with a solitary pipe, fell into a train of thought.

The first thing was to stifle a strong inclination to reconsider Suffield's proposal. It was not too late now. His pony was only grazing on the town commonage hard by; he could have him brought in less than half an hour. And then came the thought that the motive of this was not the prospect of sport, and the conviction was an unwelcome one. As we have said, he had already seen a good deal of Mona Ridsdale. There was something about her that attracted him powerfully. What was it? He was not in love with her; the bare idea that he might ever become so stirred him uncomfortably. She was a splendid creature, a physical paragon, but love! ah, that was another thing. Besides, what had he to do with love, even were he capable of feeling it?

That sort of blissful delusion, veiling Dead Sea ashes, was all very well when one was young; which he no longer was. His life was all behind him now, which made it perhaps the more easy to start again almost where others left off. The modest salary wherewith the Colonial Government saw fit for the present to requite his services, did not constitute his sole means of existence; he possessed something over and above it, though little, and all combined gave him just enough to get along with a moderate degree of comfort. And as his thoughts took this practical turn, the association of ideas caused him to rise suddenly in disgust. It was time to be doing something when his meditations landed him in such a slough of grotesque idiocy, and with that intent he went straight away to his office.

But times were easy just then. He wrote a couple of official letters, and took down the deposition of a lanky Boer with a tallow countenance, adorned by a wispy beard, who, amid much expectoration and nervous shifting of his battered and greasy wide-awake from one hand to another, delivered himself of a long and portentous complaint against a neighbour, for rescuing by force certain cattle, which his servants were driving to the nearest pound. Then, having satisfied this seeker of redress, with the assurance that justice would overtake the footsteps of the aggressor in the shape of a summons, and thus got rid of him, Roden took down two or three of the office volumes and set to work to study a little statute law, in which occupation he was presently disturbed by the cheery, bustling step of Mr Van Stolz.

"Well, Musgrave, not much doing!" cried the latter, perching himself on the side of the table and relighting his pipe. "What's this?" picking up the official letters. "'With reference to your circular – um – um – asking for a return of – um – um – ' Those damn circulars! Every post we get about twenty of them. Return! They'll soon want a return of the number of buttons each official wears on his shirt," – signing the letters. "What's this? Another complaint? 'Pound rescue, – Willem Cornelia Gerhardus Van Wyk.' One of the biggest liars that ever trod God's earth. I've fined him over and over again for licking his niggers or trying to do them out of their pay or something; and you'll see him in church on Sunday with a face as long as a fiddle; he's one of the 'elders,' too. He'll have to come in and swear this, though."

"He said he couldn't wait, sir, but he'll be in the first thing to-morrow, before court time."

"Oh, that'll do just as well, as I wasn't here, I say, Musgrave, old boy, we'll shut up shop and go for a walk. Got your pipe with you? Try some of this tobacco. Yes, we may as well take it easy while we can; we shall have enough to do next week with the monthly returns."

So away they started, leaving the little baked-mud town behind them; away over the open veldt, with its carpet of wax blossoms, lying beneath the slopes of the great hills which stood forth all green and gold in the afternoon sun.

"What do you think of the new doctor, Musgrave?" said the magistrate at last, as they were discussing things and people in

general.

"Lambert? H'm! Well, strictly between ourselves – not much."

"Not, eh? I thought he seemed a nice fellow."

"I don't want to prejudice anybody against him, far from it; but I've noticed that between two given people there often exists an antipathy at sight. Now, Lambert may be a decent fellow enough in the main; but between him and me that antipathy exists."

He did not add that from unerring signs he had taken the measure of the subject under discussion, and that that measure was as mean as mean could be.

"You don't take to Lambert, then?"

"No. But I know nothing against him, and so it wouldn't be fair to say anything against him on the score of a mere instinctive dislike."

"How is it you didn't go out to the Suffields this afternoon, Mr Musgrave?" said the magistrate's wife as, having returned from their walk, they were sitting on the *stoep* awaiting dinner – for with characteristic geniality his official superior had insisted upon Roden considering himself on a "run-of-the-house" footing.

"I don't know," was the reply. "There was something to be done at the office, I suppose, or perhaps I felt lazy."

Mrs Van Stolz laughed. She was a pretty, dark-eyed woman, also of Dutch extraction, as amiable and sunny-natured as her husband.

"Oh yes, of course," she retorted mischievously. "But Miss

Ridsdale was consoling herself with the new doctor – at any rate, as they drove past here. He'll cut you out, Mr Musgrave, if you don't take care. But, seriously, how do you like her on further acquaintance?"

"Oh, we seem to get along fairly well. Fight without ceremony, and all that sort of thing."

"And make it up again. Take care, Mr Musgrave; she's dangerous. Poor Mr Watkins completely lost his heart."

"Well, I haven't got one to lose, Mrs Van Stolz; so I'm safe."

"I don't know. I've already heard in two quarters that you are engaged to her."

"Hardly surprising, is it? I believe we have been seen twice in the same street. That would be more than enough for Doppersdorp."

"Don't you let the new doctor cut you out," she rejoined merrily.

"He has the advantage of youth on his side, at any rate," responded Roden. And thus the conflict of chaff went on.

Chapter Six.
The Verdict of Doppersdorp

Notwithstanding the exalted opinion of it professed by its inhabitants, the interests of Doppersdorp were from the very nature of things circumscribed. They embraced, for the most part, such entrancing topics as the price of wool, the last case of assault, ditto of water rights – for the burgesses of Doppersdorp were alike a pugnacious and litigious crowd – the last Good Templar meeting, and the number of liquors Tompkins, the waggon builder, could put away without impairing his centre of gravity; whether Macsquirt, the general dealer, would bring his threatened libel action against the *Doppersdorp Flag*– a turgid sheet of no apparent utility, save for enveloping a bar of yellow soap – that leader of public opinion having referred to him as "an insignificant 'winkler'" (i.e., small shopkeeper), instead of "that enterprising merchant," and whether he would succeed in obtaining a farthing of damages or costs from its out-at-elbows proprietor and editor, if he won – such, with slight variation, were the topics which exercised the minds and the tongues of this interesting community from year's end to year's end. Such a variation was afforded by the arrival of two new and important members in its midst. Upon these Doppersdorp was not slow to make up its mind, and whether foregathered in council and the

bar of the Barkly Hotel, or secure in the privacy of home circle, hesitated not to express the same in no halting terms.

Now, the collective mind on the subject of Roden Musgrave was adverse. His demerits were of a negative order, which is to say that his sins had been those of omission rather than of commission, and, as was sure to be the case, had rendered him unpopular. Who was he, Doppersdorp would like to know, that he shut himself up like an oyster, as if nobody was worth speaking to? though the possibility that the motive attributed to the bivalve delicacy might be wide of the mark did not occur to the originator of this felicitous simile. His predecessor, young Watkins, had been hail-fellow-well-met with everybody; was, in fact, as nice a young fellow as they could wish – and here Doppersdorp unwittingly answered its own indignant query.

Roden Musgrave had no idea of being "young Anybody" to Dick, Tom, and Harry, or hail-fellow-well-met – i.e., on terms to be patronised by the various ornaments of Doppersdorp society, shading off in imperceptible gradations to the local tailor, whom he would be obliged to indict nearly every Monday morning for having overstepped the limits of public order during the Saturday night's "spree," and been run in by the police therefor. He had a wholesome belief in the old proverb regarding too much familiarity, seeing in it a happy application to a man holding the post he did in such a place as Doppersdorp. Wherein his reasoning was sound; but the collective sense of the community opined differently, and was wont to pronounce with graphic, if

somewhat profane indignation, that the new magistrate's clerk mistook himself for his omnipotent Creator, and, in fact, wanted taking down a peg.

Not all, however, were of this opinion: his official chief, for instance, as we have seen, and perhaps two or three others, among them the retiring District Surgeon, Lambert's predecessor, a somewhat cynical, at bottom, though on the surface rollicking, kind of individual. He to Roden, while making his adieux: "We are sure to tumble up against each other again somewhere, Musgrave, but one consolation is that it couldn't be among a set of more infernal scoundrels than we shall leave behind us here, as you'll find out by the time you get a quarter of my experience of them." Which caustic delivery Roden was at no pains to controvert, feeling sure that it covered a large substratum of truth. Indeed, he was not long in suspecting that to the dictum of Lambert's predecessor there was every possibility Lambert might contribute, in his own person, his full share of confirmation.

But whatever Roden's opinion of the new doctor, it was not shared by the community at large. Lambert possessed all those qualities calculated to make him "go down" in a place like Doppersdorp. He was young and energetic – he had a certain breezy geniality of manner, and was very much hail-fellow well-met with all classes. Doppersdorp opened its arms and took him to its heart. He soon became as popular as the other was the reverse.

But, for his own unpopularity Roden Musgrave cared not a rush. He was not over eager to court the doubtful honour of being voted a "reel jolly good chep," by Dick, Tom, and Harry, as the price of his self-respect. His ambition did not lie that way. In private life he was not given to the exchange of shoulder slaps, or jocose digs in the ribs, or other genialities in the way of horseplay dear to the heart of that surprising trinity; nor in his official capacity was he inclined to wink at certain preposterous swindles, which the honest practitioners of Doppersdorp were wont to plant upon their clients in the form of "bills of costs," which latter it was his business to tax, nor would he connive at any undue laxity in the matter of taking out licences, or other omissions which might fall within his sphere. So, officially and socially, he found scant favour in Doppersdorp.

He was seated in his office one day, doing some routine work, when the door was flung open unceremoniously, and a voice demanded angrily in German English —

"What is dis – what is dis?"

Roden looked up. "Dis" consisted of a sheet of blue paper, partly printed, partly written upon, and held out between a finger and thumb of doubtful cleanliness. At the other end of the uncleanly finger and thumb was an ordinary-looking individual of Teutonic and generally unwholesome aspect, bearded, and his poll thatched with a profusion of dark bush. This worthy held the office of postmaster at Doppersdorp – an office whose emolument was not great. Still it was something. Anybody

ambitious of incurring Sonnenberg's enmity for life had only to hint at his being of Hebraic extraction, and indeed, if only from the horror in which he affected to hold such suggestion, it is highly probable he was. For the rest he had all the self-conceit of the average Teuton, who has made, or is making, a fair success of life.

"What is dis – what is dis?" he repeated in a tone tremulous with rage, flinging the paper upon the table. Roden picked it up.

"A summons," he said, glancing down it. "A summons, citing one Adolphus Sonnenberg (that's yourself, isn't it?) to appear before the Resident Magistrate on Monday next, for neglecting to comply with the Revenue Acts, in keeping a retail shop without a licence. Perfectly correctly drawn, I think," looking up inquiringly. "Eh, what? 'Damned impudence' did you say? Well, yes. I'm inclined to agree with you. It is – on the part of a man who gets a civil reminder more than a week ago that he is liable to penalties, and treats it with contempt until he is summoned in due course, then comes bursting in here and kicks up a row, with no more regard for the laws of decent behaviour than for those of his adopted country. Yes. I quite agree with your definition of it. Anything more?"

This was said blandly – suavely. The other was bursting with rage.

"Anything more?" he bellowed. "Plenty more. Wait till I see Mr Van Stolz about it. We've known each other for years. See if he'll see me insulted by a twopenny-halfpenny magistrate's

clerk."

"Quite so. He'll be here by-and-by. Meanwhile, kindly leave my office."

"I shall leave when I choose," was the defiant rejoinder.

"Ah, indeed!" Then, raising his voice, "Hey! Jan Kat! Come in here."

There was a shuffling of feet. The native constable, who had been roosting in the son on the court-house steps, appeared at the door.

"Turn Mr Sonnenberg out of my office."

Just those few words – quietly spoken – no further appeal to leave. Roden prepared to go on with his work again.

"Come, sir, you must go," said the constable.

Sonnenberg was speechless with rage. He glared first at Roden, then at the stalwart Fingo, as though he had some thoughts of assaulting one or both of them. To be turned out of the room ignominiously, and by a native! It was too much of an outrage.

"Come, sir, you must leave the office," repeated the constable more peremptorily.

Then Sonnenberg opened his mouth and there gurgled forth weird and sonorous German oaths mingled with full-flavoured English blasphemies, all rolling out so thick and fast as to tread upon each other's heels and well-nigh to choke the utterer. In the midst of a forced breathing space a voice – quick and stern – was heard to exclaim —

"What is all this about?"

Sonnenberg started. In the doorway stood the magistrate himself. But there was that in the latter's face which sadly disconcerted the frenzied Teuton. The ally he had reckoned on seemed to wear an uncommonly hostile look. However, he began volubly to explain how he had been insulted when he came in, and how the constable had been ordered to eject him. Mr Van Stolz heard him to the end, Roden putting in no word; then he looked at the summons, which still lay on the table, where it had been thrown.

"Mr Sonnenberg," he said, "I can see through a brick wall as far as most people and I don't want to be told the ins and outs of this. Whatever you have had to put up with you have brought upon yourself. You received a perfectly courteous letter reminding you that you had not yet taken out your licence. You chose to take no notice of that, so Mr Musgrave, by my instructions, drew up a summons. In coming here to talk about it you have committed an act of gross impertinence, bordering on a contempt of court, and if you think that you can come into these offices for the purpose of kicking up a row, we shall soon show you your mistake. Whatever day is set forth on the summons, that day you had better be in court – which is all I need say in the matter. Now, you may go."

Astounded, bewildered, snubbed down to the very dust, Sonnenberg slunk off. The silent, absolutely indifferent contempt of Roden, was more galling than any look of cheap triumph

might have been, for the latter had not even thought it worth while to put in one word of his version of the story, wherein he was right. But the vindictive Jew vowed within his heart the direst of dire vengeance did the chance ever present itself.

"That damned Jew!" exclaimed Mr Van Stolz in his free and confidential way, when he and his subordinate were alone together again. "You were quite right, Musgrave. You must not stand any humbug from such fellows. Watkins was too much hand-in-glove with them all, and they thought they could do anything with him in the way of trying it on, but he was young. Still, of course, it doesn't do to be too sharp on fellows. I don't mean in this case, or any other. I'm speaking generally. That impudent dog, Sonnenberg, got only half what he deserved. When is the case to come on?"

"Next Monday, sir."

"So! Well, he'll be as mild as Moses then," chuckled the other.

On another occasion a worthy representative of Doppersdorp was destined to learn that the new magistrate's clerk was not altogether born yesterday. This was a law-agent, a bumptious, ill-conditioned fellow named Tasker, who owed Roden a grudge for having ruthlessly taxed down bill after bill of costs, of a glaringly extortionate nature. He, entering the office one day, asked for twopenny revenue stamps to the amount of two pounds sterling, which having received, he threw down a deed.

"Stamp that, please."

Roden cast his eye down the document, and satisfied himself

that the stamp duty was precisely the amount just purchased.

"It wants a 2 pound stamp," he said.

"Just so," returned the other briskly. "Stick these on, please," handing him the two hundred and forty stamps, with a malicious grin.

"Stick them on yourself," was the answer.

Then Tasker began to rave. It was the duty of the Distributer of Stamps to stamp all documents brought to him, and so forth. What did he mean? To all of which Roden turned a deaf ear, and proceeded to occupy himself with other matters.

"So you refuse to stamp this document!" foamed the agent at length.

"Distinctly. Do it yourself."

"We'll soon see about that." And this fool started off to the magistrate's room to complain to that functionary that the Distributer of Stamps refused to perform the office for which he was paid. Mr Van Stolz, who knew his man, rose without a word and went into the clerk's office.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr Musgrave? Mr Tasker complains that you refuse to stamp his deed."

Roden saw the look on his chief's face that he knew so well. He anticipated some fun.

"I refused to do so on his terms, sir," he answered; "I asked him whether he wanted a 2 pound stamp, but he replied that I was to stick those two hundred and forty stamps on a bit of paper that won't hold the half of them. I ventured to think I was right

in retorting that the Government time was not to be played the fool with in that fashion."

"You're bound to stamp all deeds," struck in the agent sullenly, realising that he was likely to undergo a severe snub for his ill-conditioned idiocy.

"We are bound to supply you with the stamps, Mr Tasker," returned Mr Van Stolz, "but we are not bound to lick them for you. Therefore, if you want it done, you must do it yourself."

The agent stared, then looked foolish.

"Can I change these for a 2 pound one, then?" he growled, but quite crestfallen.

"Well, you can this time; but we are not even bound to change them for you, once they have been delivered. You can oblige Mr Tasker in this way, Mr Musgrave."

"Certainly," said Roden blandly, and, the exchange being effected, the agent departed.

"It would have served him right to have made him pay for another stamp, Musgrave," chuckled the magistrate, when they were alone together. "But the poor devil is generally so hard up that it's doubtful if he could have mustered another 2 pounds."

Now the foregoing incidents were only two out of many; which went to show that, if a man was unpopular in Doppersdorp, it was not necessarily his own fault.

Still there were some, though few, by whom Roden was well liked. Among these was Father O'Driscoll, the priest who shepherded the scanty and scattered Catholic inhabitants of the

town and district, a genial and kindly-natured old man, and by reason of those qualities widely popular, even with some of the surrounding Boers, whose traditional detestation of the creed he represented it would be impossible to exaggerate. A native of Cork, and in his younger days a keen sportsman, it was with unbounded delight he discovered that the new official was well acquainted with a considerable section of his own country and the fishing streams thereof – and frequent were the evenings which these two would spend together, over a steaming tumbler of punch, killing afresh many a big salmon in Shannon, or Blackwater, or Lee. And with sparkling eyes the old priest would disinter brown and weather-beaten fly-books, turning over, almost reverently, the soiled parchment leaves, where musty relics of the insidious gauds which had lured many a noble fish to its undoing still hung together to carry back his mind to the far, far past.

Chapter Seven.
Lambert – Out of it

"…And I can really give you no other answer."

"Don't say that, Mona. We haven't known each other so very long, certainly, but still…"

"It isn't that, Dr Lambert. I like you very much, and all that sort of thing, but I can say no more than I have said."

The two were alone together under the shade of the trees behind the house: Mona, still furtively engaged in the favourite pastime Lambert had come upon her more actively pursuing – viz., lying in a hammock admiring her own magnificent proportions. The doctor's infatuation, fired to fever heat over the symmetrical and sensuous grace of this splendid creature, had taken words, and we have just come in for the end of his proposal and – rejection.

"Of course, some one else," he jerked out bitterly, after a few moments of silence. "Lucky chap, anyhow; only, don't take too much on trust in that quarter," with a sneer.

She half started up in her hammock, and her eyes flashed. The compression of her lips, together with the hardening of the lower half of her face, was not now attractive; to an impartial spectator, it would have bordered on the repellent. But Lambert was not an impartial spectator, being madly in love.

"That's right," she retorted. "Pray go on. Just like all you men," with bitter, stinging emphasis. "When you can't have everything as you want it you swing round and become insulting."

"Oh, I had no intention that way," he returned quickly, half cowed by the lash of her anger. "I made the remark simply and solely in your own interest."

"My own interest is very well able to take care of itself." Then relenting, for she felt mercifully disposed towards this fresh victim. "Never mind. You are very much upset. I can see that. We will think no more about it."

He made no reply, but sat looking straight in front of him. The molten glare of afternoon was merging into the slanting rays of approaching sunset. From the scorching stoniness of the hillside the screech of crickets rang out in endless vibration – varied now and again by the drowsy hum of winged insects, or the "coo" of a dove from the willows overhanging the dam. A shimmer of heat lay over the wide veldt, and a thundercloud was gathering black upon the craggy turrets cresting the distant spurs of the Stormberg mountains.

"You are right. I am rather – er – well, not quite myself," said Lambert jerkily. "I think I had better go."

Mona's face softened. She had refused him, it was true, but she was not going to dismiss him altogether. That was not her way, being a young woman who thoroughly believed in proving the fallaciousness of the proverb about not being able to eat your cake and have it too.

"Don't go away angry," she said, throwing a deft plaintiveness into her pleading. "We have been such good friends – why should we not continue to be? You will come and see us as usual?"

The melting wistfulness of her eyes, even the lingering pressure of the hand which she had extended – half dropped – to him out of the hammock, had their effect on Lambert, who in a matter of this kind was as easy to make a fool of as most men.

"Well, I think I'll go now," he said unsteadily. "Yes, I hope we'll continue to be friends – for I must go on seeing you," he added with a kind of desperation. "Good-bye."

"Not good-bye. Only 'so long' as they say here," she answered kindly. And with a hurried assent he tore himself away.

Mona, left to herself, felt regretful, but it was a regret dashed with a kind of triumph; which exultation in turn gave way to a feeling bordering on fierce resentment. Not against Lambert, though; for before his horse's hoofs were out of hearing along the Doppersdorp road she had almost forgotten her dejected and discomfited adorer. No, it was evoked by his parting insinuation, which had so aroused her anger at the time, and now moved her to an exultation which made all her pulses stir, and, alone as she was, caused her to flush hotly.

Not long, however, was she destined to be left to her own thoughts, such as they were, for presently Mrs Suffield invaded her solitude. At her the latter shot a quick, curious glance.

"Well, Mona; and what have you done to him?"

"To him? To whom?"

"You know who well enough: the doctor, of course. He could hardly bid me good-bye coherently, and went away with a face as if he were about to hang himself."

"Well, he wouldn't be going *away* to do that; because he could hardly find a tree big enough for the purpose in the whole district except here. He'd have to do it here or nowhere."

"What a heartless girl you are, Mona! Why did you play with the poor fellow like that? Of coarse its all fun to you – "

"And death to him, you were going to say. But it isn't. He's glum enough now – but wait a year or two and see. He'll brag about it then, and go about hinting, or more than hinting, that there was a stunning fine girl down Doppersdorp way – this, if he's changed his abode – who was awfully smashed on him, and so on. Wait and see. I know them, and they're all alike." And the speaker stretched herself languidly, and yawned.

Grace Suffield hardly knew what to say, or whether to feel angry or laugh. But she was spared the necessity of replying, for Mona went on —

"By the way, we never see anything of Mr Musgrave now. Its ages since he's been here."

"I was nearly saying, 'small wonder, after the way you treated him.' But I won't, for there, at any rate, is a man whom even you can't make a fool of. He's built of sterner stuff."

"Is he?" with a provoking smile. "But what on earth do you mean, Grace, by 'the way in which I treated him'?"

"Oh, you know very well what I mean. You did nothing

but encourage him at first; then you cold-shouldered him, and launched out in a fast and furious flirtation with the new doctor, because he *was* new, I suppose."

"So was the other. But, Grace, I didn't cold-shoulder him. I liked the man. If he was so weak as to become jealous of the doctor, I can't help it."

"Weak!" flashed out Grace. "Weak! I don't think there's much weakness about Mr Musgrave, and I'm certain he's not the sort of man to indulge in anything so – so – feeble as jealousy."

"Then he won't do for me," rejoined Mona, with a light laugh. "I don't care about a man who can't be jealous. I like them to be jealous. Makes one more valuable, don't you see."

"All right, Mona, my child. I can only say what I've said more than once before, and that is, Wait until your own time comes, as come it assuredly will; then we shall see."

Furious with herself for doing so, Mona was conscious of colouring ever so slightly at this prediction, often uttered, but coming now so close upon her former meditations. She took refuge by the bold expedient of running in right under the enemy's guns.

"Far be it from me to disparage your knight errant, Gracie," she replied, with a mischievous laugh, and a slight emphasis on 'your.' "So he is made of sterner stuff, is he?"

The only answer was a sniff of contempt.

"Very well," she went on adopting this as an affirmative; "what will you bet me I don't bring him to my feet in a fortnight,

Gracie?"

"I won't bet on anything so ridiculous – so atrocious," was the tart reply. "Roden Musgrave is too far out of the ordinary specimen of a man to be twisted round even your finger, Mona."

It was the speaker's turn to colour now. She had spoken with such unconscious warmth that Mona was gazing fixedly at her with the most mischievous expression in the world.

"Oh!" was all she said. But the ejaculation spoke volumes.

It was a curious coincidence, but a coincidence, that Lambert, about halfway on his road to Doppersdorp, should encounter – or rather, so absent and self-absorbed was his mood, run right into – a couple of horsemen riding in the direction from which he had just come. Indeed, it was the cheery hail of one of the latter that first made him aware of their presence.

"Hi! Hallo, Lambert! You're riding in the wrong direction, man. Turn round, turn round and come back with us. We are going to have a rhybok shoot to-morrow."

But Charles Suffield's hospitable suggestion only made Lambert scowl, and mutter something about having to be back. For the second of the two horsemen was the objectionable Musgrave himself, who carried a gun. The sight almost made him hesitate. He had no mind to leave the field open to his rival, for so, in his soreness and jealousy, he considered the other. His excuse, however, was not altogether a bogus one. Of late, quite an alarming proportion of his time had been spent at Quaggasfontein, and his patients were beginning to grumble,

notably those who had ridden or driven some three or four hours to find him, and found him absent. His practice would suffer; for, apart from the possibility of the importation of a rival medico, there was a large proportion of people who would speedily find out their ability to do without treatment, from the mere fact that they had to. So he stuck to his intention as first expressed.

"Lambert looks a trifle off colour," said Suffield, with a comical glance at his companion when they had resumed their way.

"Does he? I'm not sorry he didn't leap at your suggestion. I don't particularly care for the fellow."

"He seems awfully gone on Mona, and I suppose she's playing the fool with him, as usual. She's a most incurable flirt, that girl, and she certainly does manage to bring them all to their knees. I tell her she'll end her days an old maid."

The other smiled drily over Suffield's artless ramblings, for the two men had become very intimate by this time. It occurred to him that Mona had thought at one time to pass him through the same mill.

The warmth of welcome Roden met at the hands of his hostess was about equal to the warmth with which she scolded him. What did he mean by such behaviour? It was nearly a month since he had been near them. Busy? A great deal to do? Nonsense! She knew better than that. Doppersdorp Civil Servants were not the most hard-worked of their kind, there was always that redeeming point in the Godforsakenness of the place, and so on, and so on.

"That's right, Mrs Suffield; crowd it on thick! Nothing like making up for lost time," he laughed.

"Well, but – you deserve it."

"Oh yes. I won't make that bad excuse which is worse than none, and which you have been discounting before I made it. Besides, you owe me a blowing-up. I'm afraid I dragooned you far harder, when you were handed over to my tender mercies, crossing the river in the box."

"Well, you were rather ill-tempered," she admitted maliciously. "I wonder how Mona would have stood it."

"Stood what? The crossing or the temper?" said Mona. "I've got a fine old crusted stock of the latter myself."

"You have," assented Roden.

"That's rude."

"Your own doing," was the ready rejoinder. "You left me the choice of two evils, though, Miss Ridsdale. Wouldn't it be ruder still to contradict a lady?"

"Go on, you two hair-splitters!" laughed Grace. "Mr Musgrave, I've put you in the same room you had last time. You know your way. Supper will be ready directly."

"And you'd better turn on a fire in the sitting-room, Grace," said Suffield. "The days are hot for July, in this high veldt, but the nights are nipping. Besides, like a nigger, I'm keen on a fire to smoke the evening pipe beside, when one can invent the shadow of an excuse for lighting one. It's more snag, you know."

And so it was. Seated there at the chimney-corner smoking

the post-prandial pipe, while the burning logs crackled brightly, and conversation flowed free and unrestrained, varied by a song or two from Mona, as also from Suffield, who was no mean vocalist, and the prospect of some sport on the morrow, it occurred to Roden that life as at present constituted was a fairly enjoyable thing. That illustrious, if out-of-the-world township, Doppersdorp, might not have been precisely the locality he would have chosen as an abiding place; but even it contained compensating elements.

Chapter Eight.
Concerning the Chase

"Well, you two Sabbath-breakers!" was Grace Suffield's laughing greeting to her husband and guest on the following morning, as she joined the two on the *stoep*, where they were cleaning and oiling a rifle apiece preparatory to the day's doings. "So you're not to be persuaded into abandoning your wicked enterprise?"

"It's the only day a poor hard-worked Civil Servant has the whole of, Mrs Suffield," answered Roden.

"Oh yes! I daresay. As if you couldn't have as many days as you chose to ask for. But come in now. Breakfast is ready."

They entered, and were immediately beset by the glum face and wistful entreaty of the eldest hopeful, begging to be allowed to come too.

"Not to-day, sonny; not to-day," answered his father decisively. "You can go out any day; you're not a hard-worked Civil Servant. Besides, we shall hardly get anything; we're only going just for the sake of the ride. Where's Mona?" he added. "Late, as usual?"

"Oh yes. We needn't wait for her."

Well that they did not, for breakfast was nearly over when she sailed in, bringing with her – surprise; for she was clad in a riding

habit.

"Hallo, young woman! What's the meaning of this? Going to ride into Doppersdorp to church?" sang out Suffield.

"Not to-day, Charlie. I'm going to see you and Mr Musgrave shoot a buck."

"Eh!" said Suffield, with a blank stare at Roden.

"Oh, you needn't look so disappointed, or you might have the civility not to show it. I'm going with you, and that's all about it," said Mona, with nonchalant decision, beginning upon her tea.

"Well, upon my word! But we are going into the very dev – er – I mean, all sorts of rough places, right up among the *krantzes*. Who on earth is going to look after such a superfine young party as you?"

"Wait until somebody is asked to. Meanwhile, I flatter myself I'm old enough and ugly enough to look after myself."

"Father, you said just now you were only going for the sake of the ride," struck in the disappointed hopeful.

"Um – yes, did I though? So I did, Frank. I say, though. Did you ever hear the saying, that small boys should be seen and not heard? If you're ready, Musgrave, we'll go round and see about the horses." Under which somewhat cowardly expedient Suffield rose to effect a timely retreat. "By the way, what are you going to ride, Miss Independence?" he added, turning on the threshold.

"Oh, I've arranged all that," replied Mona, indifferently.

And she had. When they reached the stable they found the ragged Hottentot groom already placing a side-saddle upon one

of the horses, a steady-going sure-footed bay.

Now, Roden Musgrave was a real sportsman; which, for present purposes, may be taken to mean that, whatever might be lovely woman's place, in his opinion it was not out buck-shooting among more or less dangerous slopes and crags. Nevertheless, when Mona's glance had rested momentarily upon his face as she made her surprising announcement, he flattered himself that he had done nothing to show his real opinion. Nor had he, actively, but there was not the slightest sign of brightening at the news, such as would have lit up the countenance of, say, Lambert, in like case. And this she, for her part, did not fail to note.

It was a lovely morning as they rode forth along the base of the great sweeping slopes, terraced at intervals with buttresses of cliff. The air was as clear and exhilarating as wine, and the sky one vivid, radiant, azure vault. High overhead a white fleecy cloud or two soared around a craggy peak.

"Isn't it a day?" cried Mona, half breathlessly, as they pulled up to a walk, after a long canter over the nearly level plain. "Grace thinks we are an out-and-out sinful trio."

"So we are, Miss Ridsdale," said Roden. "But you're the worst. Woman – lovely woman – is nothing if not devout. Now, with Suffield and myself it doesn't matter. We are the unregenerate and brutal sex."

"Well it isn't our fault, anyway," said Suffield. "We are Church of England, and that persuasion is not represented in Doppersdorp. And, at any rate, it's better to be doing something

rational on Sunday than to sit twirling one's thumbs and yawning, and smoking too many pipes all day because it is Sunday."

"Why don't you agitate for a church, then?" asked Roden.

"Oh, the bishop and the dean are too hard at it, fighting out their battle royal in Grahamstown, to spare time to attend to us. There's a Methodist meeting-house in Doppersdorp and a Catholic chapel, as well as the Dutch Reformed church, but we are left to slide."

"Have you been to the Catholic church, Mr Musgrave?" said Mona. "I go there sometimes, though I always have to fight Grace before and after on the subject. But I don't see why I shouldn't go. I like it."

"That surely should be justification enough."

"Don't put on that nasty, cynical tone when I want you to talk quite nicely."

"But I don't know how."

"I'm not going to pay you the compliment you're fishing for. What were we talking about? Oh, I know. Isn't Father O'Driscoll a dear old man?"

"I suppose so, if that means something in his favour."

"That is just like you," said Mona, half angrily. "Why don't you agree with me cordially instead of in that half-hearted way, especially as you and he have become such friends? They are already saying in Doppersdorp that you will soon turn Catholic."

"One might 'turn' worse. But Doppersdorp, as not infrequently happens, is wide of the mark. When the old man and I make an

evening of it our conversation is not of faith, but of works. We talk about fishing."

"What? Always?"

"Always. Don't you know that the votary of the fly when, after long abstinence, he runs against another votary of the fly, takes a fresh lease of life. Now, Father O'Driscoll and myself are both such votaries, the only two here. Wherefore, when we get together, we enthuse upon the subject like anything."

"It's refreshing to learn that *you* can enthuse upon any subject," Mona rejoined.

"Oh, I can. Wait till we get up yonder among the rhybok."

"This way," cut in Suffield, striking into a by-track. "We must call in at Stoffel Van Wyk's. That long *berg* at the back of his place is first-rate for rhybok."

"Most we?" expostulated Mona. "But we shall have to drink bad coffee."

"Well, the berry as there distilled is not first-rate."

"And try and make conversation with the *vrouw*?"

"That too."

"Well, don't let's go."

"Mona, are you in command of this expedition, or am I? The course I prescribe is essential to its success. Hallo! Jump off, Musgrave! There's a shot!"

They had turned off from the open plain now, and were riding through a narrow *poort*, or defile, which opened soon into another hill-encircled hollow. The passage was overhung

with rugged cliffs, in which ere and there a stray euphorbia or a cactus had found root. Up a well-nigh perpendicular rock-face, sprawling, shambling like a tarantula on a wall, a huge male baboon was making his way. He must have been quite two hundred yards distant, and was looking over his shoulder at his natural enemies, the while straining every muscle to gain the top of the cliff.

Roden's piece was already at his shoulder. There was a crack, then a dull thud. The baboon relaxed his hold, and with one spasmodic clutch toppled heavily to the earth.

"Good shot!" cried Suffield enthusiastically. "It's not worth while going to pick him up. I wonder what he's doing here all alone, though. You don't often catch an old man baboon napping."

"Don't you feel as if you had committed a murder, Mr Musgrave?" said Mona.

"Not especially. On the other hand, I am gratified to find that this old Snider shoots so true. It's a Government one I borrowed from the store for the occasion."

"Murder be – um! – somethinged!" said Suffield. "These baboons are the most mischievous *schelms* out. They have discovered that young lamb is good, the brutes! Sympathy wasted, my dear child."

But when they reached Stoffel Van Wyk's farm they found, to Mona's intense relief, that that typical Boer and all his house were away from home. This they elicited with difficulty between

the savage bayings of four or five great ugly bullet-headed dogs, which could hardly be restrained from assailing the new arrivals by the Kaffir servant who gave the information.

"We'll go on at once, then, Musgrave," said Suffield. "Stoffel's a very decent fellow, and won't mind us shooting on his farm; though, of course, we had to call at the house as a matter of civility."

The place for which they were bound was a long, flat-topped mountain, whose summit, belted round with a wall of cliff, was only to be gained here and there where the rock had yawned away into a deep gully. It was along the slopes at the base of the rocks that bucks were likely to be put up.

"We'll leave the horses here with Piet," said Suffield, "and steal up quietly and look over that ridge of rocks under the *krantz*. We'll most likely get a shot."

The ridge indicated sloped away at right angles from the face of a tall cliff. It was the very perfection of a place for a stalk. Dismounting, they turned over their horses to the "after-rider."

"Hold hard, Miss Ridsdale. Don't be in such a hurry," whispered Roden warningly. "If you chance to dislodge so much as a pebble, the bucks down there'll hear it, if there are any."

Mona, who was all eagerness and excitement, took the hint. But a riding habit is not the most adaptable of garments for stalking purposes, and she was conscious of more than one look, half of warning, half of vexation, on the part of her male companions daring the advance.

Lying flat on their faces they peered over the ridge, and their patience was rewarded. The ground sloped abruptly down for about a hundred feet, forming, with the jutting elbow of the cliff, a snug grassy *hoek*, or corner. Here among boulders and fragments of rock scattered about, were seven rhybok, two rams and five ewes.

They had been grazing; some were so yet, but others had thrown up their heads, and were listening intently.

They were barely two hundred yards distant. Quiet, cautious as had been the advance, their keen ears must have heard something. They stood motionless, gazing in the direction of the threatened peril, their ringed black horns and prominent eyes plainly distinguishable to the stalkers. One, a fine large ram, seemingly the leader of the herd, had already begun to move uneasily.

"Take the two rams as they stand," whispered Suffield.

Crash! Then a long reverberating roar rolls back in thunder from the base of the cliff. Away go the bucks like lightning, leaving one of their number kicking upon the ground. This has fallen to Roden's weapon; the other, the big ram, is apparently unscathed.

"I'll swear he's hit!" cried Suffield, in excitement and vexation. "Look at him, Musgrave. Isn't he going groggily?"

Roden shaded his eyes to look after the leader of the herd, whose bounding form was fast receding into distance.

"Yes, he's hit," he said decidedly. "A fine buck too. He may

run for miles with a pound of lead in him, though. They're tough as copper-wire. We'd better sing out to Piet to bring on the horses, and try and keep him in sight anyhow."

The fleeing bucks had now become mere specks, as, their stampede in no wise abated, they went bounding down the mountain-side more than half a mile away.

"Look there, Suffield," went on Roden, still shading his eyes; "there are only the five ewes. Your ram's hit, and can't keep up, or else has split off of his own accord. Anyway, he's hit, and will probably lie up somewhat under the *krantz*."

Away they went, right along the base of the iron wall, which seemed to girdle the mountain for miles. And here Mona's boast about being able to take care of herself was put to a very real and practical test, for the ground was rough and stony and the slope here and there dangerously steep.

Suddenly an animal sprang up, right in front of them, apparently out of the very rocks, at about a hundred yards.

"That's him!" shouted Suffield, skimming past his companions, bent on diminishing the distance to get in a final shot. But this was not so easy, for a full-grown rhybok ram, even when wounded, is first-rate at; and this one was no exception to the rule, for he went so well and dodged so craftily behind every stone and tuft of grass that his pursuer would have to shoot him from the saddle, or not at all. Suffield, realising this, opened fire hastily, and of course missed clean.

"We've lost him!" he growled, making no effort to continue

the pursuit.

But the quarry here suddenly altered its tactics. Possibly suspecting danger in front, it turned suddenly, and doubling, shot down the steep slope at lightning speed, and at right angles to its former course. There rang out a heavy report at some little distance behind. The buck leaped high in the air, then, turning a couple of somersaults, rolled a score of yards farther, and lay stone dead.

"By Jove, Musgrave, but you can shoot!" cried Suffield, as they met over the quarry. "Three to four hundred yards, and going like an express train. *Allamaagtag*! I grudge you that shot."

"He's yours, anyhow. First blood, you know."

They examined the animal. Roden's ball had drilled clean through the centre of the heart, but the first wound would have sickened anything less tenacious of life. The bullet had struck far back in the flank, passing through the animal's body. Leaving the after-rider to perform the necessary rites and load up the buck upon his horse, together with the first one, which was already there, they moved up to a snug corner under the rocks for lunch.

"We haven't done badly so far," quoth Suffield, with a sandwich in one hand and a flask in the other.

"We must get one more," said Roden, "or rather, you must. That'll exactly 'tie' the shoot; one and a half apiece."

"Well, and have I been so dreadfully in the way, Mr Musgrave?" said Mona.

"I am not aware that I ever predicted that contingency, Miss

Ridsdale."

"Not in words, perhaps; but you looked so glum when I announced my intention of coming, that, like the pack of cards instead of the Testament in the wicked conscript's pocket, which turned the fatal bullet, it did just as well."

"Did I? If so, it was inadvertently. But I daresay my conscience was pricking me in advance over that baboon I was destined to murder. That might account for it."

The fact was that, however dubious had been his reception of the said announcement, Roden was in his heart of hearts conscious that the speaker's presence with them that day, so far from being a drawback, had constituted rather an attraction than otherwise. Indeed, he was surprised to find how much so. When Mona Ridsdale chose to lay herself out to make the most of herself, she did not do it by halves. A good horsewoman, she looked splendidly well in the saddle, the well-fitting riding habit setting off the curves and proportions of her magnificent figure to every advantage. Moreover, she was in bright spirits, and to-day had laid herself out to be thoroughly companionable, and, to do her justice, had well succeeded; and more than once, when the pace had been too great, or the ground too rough, or a dark, haunting terror of her saddle turning had smote her, she had manfully repressed any word or look which might be construed into an appeal for consideration or aid. She had even been successful beyond her hopes, for Roden, silently observant, had not suffered this to escape him, though manifesting no sign

thereof. So the trio, as they sat there under the cliff, lunching upon sandwiches in true sportsmanlike fashion, with a vast panorama of mountain and plain, craggy, turret-like summit, and bold, sweeping, grassy slope, spread out beneath and around for fifty miles on either hand, and the fresh, bracing breeze of seven thousand feet above sea-level tempering the golden and glowing sunshine which enveloped them, felt on excellent terms with each other and all the world.

"The plan now," said Suffield, when they had taken it easy long enough, "will be to separate and go right round the *berg*. It is lying under the *krantz* we shall find the bucks, if anywhere."

"Where does my part come in in that little scheme, Charlie?" said Mona. "Who am I to inflict myself upon?"

"Upon me, of course," said Roden.

She shot a rapid glance at him as though to see if he were in earnest, and her heart beat quick. This time she was sure that no dubiousness lurked beneath his tone.

"Just as you like," she rejoined; for her, quite subduedly. Then Piet, the after-rider, having received his instructions – viz., to start off homeward with the two bucks already slain – they separated accordingly.

Chapter Nine.
"Love that is First and Last…"

"Now you will have to take care of me," began Mona, after some minutes of silence, as they started slowly to ride round beneath the cliff.

"A heavy responsibility for any one man during a whole hour or more."

"You have not found it so hitherto?"

"Oh, then there were two of us. We took the risk between us. Hallo!" he broke off, "that's a fine specimen!"

She followed his upward glance. A huge bird of prey had shot out from the cliff overhead and was circling in bold, powerful sweeps, uttering a loud, raucous scream.

"As good a specimen of a *dasje-vanger* as I ever saw," went on Roden, still gazing upward. "Now, I wonder if a Snider bullet would blow it all to pieces at that distance!"

"You'll never bring it down with a bullet?" said Mona eagerly.

"Not, eh? Perhaps not."

The great eagle, jet black save for her yellow feet standing out against the thick dusky plumage, floated round and round in her grand gyrations, her flaming eye visible to the spectators as she turned her head from side to side. Roden, without dismounting, put up his rifle. Simultaneously with the report a cloud of black

feathers flew from the noble bird, who, as though with untamable determination to disappoint her slayer, shot downward obliquely, with arrow-like velocity, and disappeared beyond the brow of the cliff overhead.

"You were right," said Roden, slipping a fresh cartridge into his piece. "I did not bring it down, for with characteristic perversity, the ill-conditioned biped has chosen to yield up the ghost at the top of the cliff, whereas we are at the bottom."

"Oh, can't we go up to it? This is much better game than those poor little rhybok. But, wherever did you learn to shoot like that?"

"We can go up!" he replied, purposely or accidentally evading the last question. "That gully we passed, a little way back is climbable. But you had better wait below. It will be hard work."

"So that's how you propose taking care of me – to leave me all alone? Not if I know it. The place looked perfectly safe."

Safe it was: a narrow, staircase-like *couloir*, consisting of a series of natural steps; the rocks on either side heavily festooned with thick masses of the most beautiful maidenhair fern. Leaving the horses beneath, they began the climb, and after a couple of hundred feet of this they stood on the summit of the mountain.

The summit was as flat as a table, and covered with long coarse grass, billowing in the fresh strong breeze which swept it like the surface of a lake. Around, beneath, free and vast, spread the rolling panorama of mountain and plain.

"Ah! this is to live indeed!" broke from Mona. "I don't know

that I ever enjoyed a day so much in my life."

The other did not immediately look at her, but when he presently did steal a keen, but furtive glance at her face, there was something there, which, combined with the tone wherein she had uttered the above words, set him thinking.

"I don't see anything of the *dasje-vanger*," he said, at length; "and yet this is about the place where it should have fallen. It may have fluttered into the long grass, but couldn't have gone far with that bullet hole through it. Now, you search that way, and I'll search this."

For a few minutes they searched hither and thither; then a cry from Mona brought him to her side.

"This is the place," she said. "Look!"

She stood as near as she dared to the brow of the cliff, pointing downwards. On the very verge, fluttering among the grass bents, were several small feathers, jet black, and such as might have come out of the breast of the great bird. Roden advanced to the brink.

"This *is* the place!" he declared, leaning over. "And, look! there lies our quarry, stone dead. The spiteful brute has chosen a difficult place, if not an inaccessible one."

"Where? Let me see. Hold my hand, while I look down, for I don't half like it."

This he did, and shudderingly she peered over. From where they stood the cliff fell for about twenty feet obliquely, but very steep, and grown over with tufts of grass, to a narrow ledge

scarcely two feet wide; below this – space. But upon this ledge lay the great eagle, with outstretched wings, stone dead, its head hanging over the abyss.

"I can get at it there, fortunately," muttered Roden.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going down to pick up the bird."

"You are not."

He stared.

"But I want it," he urged. "It is too fine a specimen to be left lying there."

"Never mind; you can shoot another. Now, don't go, don't!"

Again he recognised the expression which came into her face, as with startled eyes and voice which shook with the very *abandon* of her entreaty, she stood there before him. What then? He had seen that look in other faces, but what had come of it!

"I am going down," he repeated.

"You cannot; you shall not. It is too horrible. You will be killed before my eyes. Won't you give it up because *I* ask you?"

"No."

There were men who would have given a great deal to have heard Mona Ridsdale speak to them in that tone, who would willingly have risked their lives, rather than have refrained from risking them, at her request. This one, however, answered short and straight and with brutal indifference, "No."

They looked at each other for a moment, as though both realised that this was a strange subject for a conflict of will, then

she said,

"So you will not give it up?"

"No. It is an easy undertaking, and for me a safe one."

She turned away without another word, and he began his descent.

This, however, was less simple than it looked, as is usually the case, or rather, so appallingly simple that a slight slip, or the loosening of a grass tussock, would send the average climber whirling into space. But Roden Musgrave was an experienced hand on mountains, and thoroughly understood the principle of distributing his weight. In a very short space of time he was standing on the ledge, and had picked up the dead bird.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.