Mitford Bertram

A Secret of the Lebombo

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Mitford B.

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Содержание

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Chapter One.
The Sheep-Stealers

The sun flamed down from a cloudless sky upon the green and gold of the wide valley, hot and sensuous in the early afternoon. The joyous piping of sheeny spreeuws mingled with the crowing of cock koorhans concealed amid the grass, or noisily taking to flight to fuss up half a dozen others in the process. Mingled, too, with all this, came the swirl of the red, turgid river, whose high-banked, willow-fringed bed cut a dark contrasting line through the lighter hue of the prevailing bush. From his perch a white-necked crow was debating in his mind as to whether a certain diminutive tortoise crawling among the stones was worth the trouble of cracking and eating, or not.

Wyvern moved stealthily forward, step by step, his pulses tingling with excitement. Then parting some boughs which came in the way he peered down into the *donga* which lay beneath. What he saw was not a pleasant sight, but – it was what he had expected to see.

Two Kafirs were engaged in the congenial, to them, occupation of butchering a sheep. Not a pleasant sight we have said, but to this man doubly unpleasant, for this was one of his own sheep – not the first by several, as he suspected. Well, he had caught the rascals red-handed at last.

Wyvern stood there cogitating as to his line of action. The Kafirs, utterly unsuspicious of his presence, went on with their cutting and quartering, chattering gleefully in their deep-toned voices, as to what good condition the meat was in, and what a succulent feast they would have when the darkness of night should enable them to fetch it away to the huts from this remote and unsuspected hiding-place. One was clad in a pair of greasy moleskin trousers, hitched up to his shoulders by a pair of filthy braces, largely repaired with string; the other was clad in nothing at all, unless a string of blue beads round his neck counted for anything. In the trouser-wearing savage Wyvern recognised one of his own herds, whose absence from the flock under his charge had led to the present discovery. The other, a tall, powerful, desperate-looking scoundrel with a deeply pock-marked countenance, he did not recognise at all.

It was all very well to have caught them red-handed, but the question was, what course to pursue. They were two to one, hard, wiry savages at that. They had sheath knives and he was unarmed; for a pocket-knife is of little or no use as a defensive weapon in that it is bound to shut on the hand of the wielder. They were engaged in an act the penalty of which spelt lashes and fine, or, at best a year's hard labour; was it likely they would submit meekly to capture? And then, as there flitted through his mind a recent instance of a stock fanner being unhesitatingly murdered under precisely similar circumstances, Wyvern began to realise that his own position was one of some little danger. Would it not be wiser to withdraw now, and take steps for trapping the culprits when he should have more force at his disposal? Decidedly here was food for reflection.

But the matter was taken out of his hands by one of those unforeseen trifles upon which so much may turn. In his eagerness to watch the proceedings just below he had let one hand come into contact with the leaf of a prickly pear, which sprouted interwoven with the bushes through which he was peering. Now contact with an ordinary thorn would not have moved him, but contact with these innumerable and microscopic stings, as it were, which once in the skin are bound to leave painful recollection of that fact even for weeks, inspired a sort of instinctive horror that had made him start. Even before the stone which he had dislodged beneath his foot had begun to roll into the *donga* the two miscreants looked up quickly and saw him.

The startled ejaculation which escaped them, gave way to a rapid murmur. Wyvern caught but one word and that was sufficient. He knew that he was about to fight for his life – and, he was unarmed.

The *donga* was of no depth, perhaps the height of a man, nor were the sides perpendicular; further down where it joined the river-bed they were both high and steep. Lithe, agile as monkeys or cats, the two Kafirs sprang up the bank, gripping their blood-smeared knives, but – each from a different end. They were going to assail him from two sides at once.

Cool now, and deadly dangerous because cornered, in a lightning flash of thought Wyvern decided upon his plan of campaign. He picked up two stones, each large enough to constitute a handful.

The first to appear was his own boy, Sixpence, and no sooner did he appear than he received one stone – hurled by a tolerably powerful arm, and at five yards' distance – bang, crash on the forehead. It would have broken any skull but a native skull. The owner of this particular skull stopped short, staggered, reeled, shook his head stupidly, half-blinded by the blood that was pouring down his face, then subsided; incidentally, into a mass of prickly pear leaves – and thorns. Wyvern, his eyes ablaze with the light of battle, stood, the other stone ready in his right hand, ready to mete out to Number Two a like reception.

But the other did not appear. Instead, a volume of exclamations in deep-toned Xosa, together with a wholly unaccountable hissing, came from the other side of the bush by which he was standing. Wyvern stepped forth. The other Kafir stood, literally anchored by a huge puff-adder which was twined round his leg, not daring to use his knife lest missing those sinuous coils he should fatally wound himself. And the hideous bloated reptile, blown out in its wrath, hung there, tightening its coils in spasmodic writhings as it struck the imprisoned limb again and again with its deadly fangs.

"Throw down the knife, and I'll help you," cried Wyvern, in Boer Dutch.

But the savage, whether it was that he understood not a word of that classic tongue, or that he had gone mad with a very frenzy of despair, instead of obeying, with lightning-like swiftness, hurled the knife – a long-bladed, keenly-ground butcher one – full at the speaker. Wyvern sprang aside, but even then the whizz past his ear told that he had looked death rather closely in the face that day.

His first act was to possess himself of the weapon, then self-preservation moved him to go back to the other, and get possession of his. The said other lay stupidly, still half-stunned, but he had dropped his knife in the fall. This, too, Wyvern picked up, and now, feeling equal to the pair of them, he went back to where the man and the snake were still struggling.

And a ghastly and horrible scene met his eyes. The man, who seemed to have gone completely mad, was plucking and tearing at the snake, uttering the most hideous howls, and literally foaming at the mouth, as he strove to free himself from those terrible coils. He must have been bitten again and again, as now with his hands within the reptile's very mouth he strove to tear its head asunder. The struggle had brought him to the brink of a much deeper part of the *donga*, and now, as Wyvern looked, puzzled what to do next, seemed to be weakening or to lose his balance. He swayed, then toppled heavily through the bushes, and man and snake went crashing down the well-nigh perpendicular bank.

His own peril thus removed, Wyvern's blood curdled within him at the horror he had witnessed. He went to the place and looked over, but could see nothing. It was too much overhung with bushes – and save for where these had been displaced by a heavy body crashing through, there was no sign or trace of life; no sound either. Probably with all that venom in his system the wretched Kafir was already in the state of coma which should precede death. For him there was no chance, absolutely none. Wyvern went back to where he had left the other.

"Now, Sixpence," he said, speaking in the *taal*, which in the Cape Colony is the usual means of communication between white men and natives, "stand up, and put your hands behind you. I'm going to tie them."

But the fellow begged and prayed that he might be spared this. He would not try to run away, he protested. Where was the use, since his wife and children were at the huts, and besides, was he not

well known? Farther he felt very ill, and hardly able to walk as it was, from the effects of the terrible blow the Baas had given him. Perhaps, too, on the strength of that the Baas might bring himself to forgive him. He would serve him so faithfully after that – and the Baas could take twice the value of the sheep out of his wages. Surely the Baas might bring himself to forgive him.

Wyvern, contemplating him, thought he might even be fool enough to do that; and as he put back into his pocket the lanyard of *reimpje* wherewith he had intended to tie the fellow's hands, he feared that he might.

"I don't know about that, Sixpence," he said. "You have been a pretty *schelm* sort of a boy, you know. Besides, you would have killed me, you and that other. Who is he, by the way?"

"One of Baas Ferreira's boys, Baas," naming a Dutchman whose farm adjoined the river on the other side.

"Well, and which of you was it that planned this *slaag*?"

The Kafir shrugged his shoulders.

"We did it between us, Baas," he said, and the answer moved Wyvern the more to let him down easy, though fully alive to the bad policy of doing so, for he appreciated the fact that the fellow had not tried to save himself by throwing the blame on his accomplice.

They had reached the place where Wyvern had left his horse, and now as he mounted he said:

"Now walk on in front of me, Sixpence. I shall think seriously over what I shall do about you. You would get ever so many years in the *tronk* you know, for coming at me with the knife – and that apart from what you'd get for 'slaag-ing' the sheep. I expect the other fellow is dead by this time. The snake struck him again and again."

"*Nkose*!" murmured the Kafir deprecatorily, then relapsed into silence. Before they had gone far Wyvern said:

"Go back to your flock, Sixpence. I expect it has straggled a good bit by this time. But – " impressively – "don't attempt to run away. You are sure to be caught if you do, and then you will have thrown away your last chance."

"*Nkose*!" murmured the Kafir again, and bending down he kissed his master's foot as it rested in the stirrup. Then he walked away.

"Poor devil," said Wyvern to himself, gazing after him as he rode on. "Well, we are all poor devils – I the most of the lot. I believe I could almost bring myself to envy that ochre-smeared scion of Xosa. He doesn't need much, and gets it all, while I – ?"

Chapter Two.
Lalanté

Riding slowly home Wyvern's thoughts took on no more cheerful a vein as he looked round upon his farm, which would soon be his no longer. It never ought to have been his at all. He had started by paying far too much for it. He had been struck by the pleasant situation of the place, and was determined to have it at all costs. Further, it was bad veldt, being, in stock-farming parlance, "boer-ed out," that is to say exhausted. It required years of rest what time he took it up, but Wyvern started about three thousand sheep upon it, and contentedly, though unconsciously, prepared to watch their decimation. It came. He had put his little all into the venture, and now his little all was fast approaching vanishing point.

He reached home, off-saddled his horse, and turned the animal loose into an enclosure. By the time he had done so, and entered the house, the episode of the sheep "slaag-ing" had almost faded from his mind. The excitement of the discovery and the struggle past now, in the light of more serious matter the incident seemed of small importance.

You might read something of Wyvern's temperament in the state of his living room. Take the large table, for instance. It was littered with books and papers covering quite two thirds of its space, a careless heap, which gradually encroaching more and more had caused his old Hottentot cook, and general indoor factotum, to ask grumblingly and repeatedly how she was to find room to lay the cloth for the Baas' dinner, with all that rubbish blocking up the whole table. There were letters lying there too, letters unopened, which might have so remained for a couple of days or a week. Wyvern knew or guessed what they were all about: nothing pleasant, that was certain. Why then, should he bother himself? He would wait till he was more in the vein. But somehow "the vein" would be long in coming, and even unpleasant letters, especially those of a business nature, do not improve – like cigars – by keeping. Still – that was Wyvern.

Even the pictures on the walls, mostly framed photographs, were more or less hung anyhow, while some were slipping out of their mounts. Of one, however, none of this held good, and this was hung so that it faced him where he sat at table.

It was the photograph of a girl – and a very handsome girl at that. The eyes, large and clear, seemed to follow the inmate's every movement in all parts of the room, while a generously moulded figure was set forth in the three parts length of the portrait. In the firm, erect pose there was strength, decisiveness, even a suggestion of unconventionality perhaps. At this he gazed, with a murmured expression of ardent love, as he dropped into his seat, and the look of weariful dejection deepened upon his face.

"You, too, lost to me," he murmured. "You, too, passing from me. What an utter, infernal mess I've made of things. I've a good mind to end it all. It might even come to that some day."

His glance had gone round to an object in the further corner. It was a shot-gun standing upright against the wall. He eyed it, gloomily. Just then a door opened, and to the accompaniment of a clatter of plates and things his Hottentot cook entered, bearing a tray. At her Wyvern glanced resentfully.

"I don't want that stuff," he said. "Take it away again."

"*Oh, goeije*! and it is the Baas' dinner," exclaimed the old woman.

"I don't want any dinner," was the weary answer. "I'll have a smoke instead. Do you hear, Sanna. Get away with it."

"Not want any dinner! Have a smoke instead!" echoed old Sanna. "And the Baas has eaten nothing since breakfast and very little then. *Nouw ja*! it is wasting the gifts of the good God! And this is a guinea-fowl, too, and partridge – stewed guinea-fowl and partridge, the dish the Baas likes best. And now the Baas says take it away."

"Yes. Take it away, old Sanna. I can't eat."

Muttering, she turned and withdrew. Wyvern, suddenly realising that he might have hurt the poor old creature's feelings, was about to recall her, when a sound struck upon his ear. It was that of the hoof-strokes of a ridden horse. The dogs outside greeted it with frenzied clamour.

Wyvern frowned. The sound was an unwelcome one, for it probably meant someone who was going to make use of his place for an hour's off-saddle, and who, in his then vein, would most certainly bore the life out of him.

He went out on the stoep. The hoof-strokes had ceased, so had the canine clamour. He went down the steps and when about to turn the corner of the house an advancing figure did so at the same time, with such suddenness that both nearly collided. It was that of a girl. Both started – he with an exclamation of delighted astonishment. Then without more ado, the newcomer put both her hands upon his shoulders and kissed him, and, tall as he was, she had not to reach up over much in the process either. She was the original of the portrait which occupied the place of honour within.

"Lalanté! My own one, how sweet of you to give me this surprise," he murmured, releasing her from the long, close embrace which had followed immediately upon the first amenity. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. There'd have been no fun in bringing a crowd."

"Well, sit down inside and rest while I see to your horse. Hitched to the gate, I suppose?"

"Yes. For the other I'm not going to obey. I'll go with you. Do you want to be away from me for the first ten minutes I'm here?"

"Do I, indeed? Come along, then."

They went to the gate, she leaning slightly against him, as they walked, his hand passed lovingly through her arm. And they looked an ideal pair physically, he with his six foot of strong English manhood, his bronzed face, fine and thoughtful, though even now unable to shake off the recollection of crowding in troubles; she, lithe and rounded, moving with the perfect grace of a natural and unstudied ease, her large grey eyes, thickly lashed, wide open and luminous with the sheer delight of this meeting, her cheeks just a little browned with the generous kiss of the African sun. Yes, they seemed an ideal pair, and yet – and yet – this is a world wherein there is no room for ideals.

When they returned to the house they were met by old Sanna, voluble.

"*Daag, Klein Missis. Ja*, but – I am glad you are come. Now you will make the Baas eat his dinner, ah, yes – surely you will do that. Nothing since breakfast, and out all day in the hot sun, and says he will not eat. And I have made him what he likes best."

The new arrival looked for a moment at Wyvern, then, with decision: "Bring in the dinner, Sanna, and you can put two plates. I am going to have some too."

The old woman crowed.

"See now what I always say. It is time we had a Missis here. What is a farm without a Missis? It is like a *schuilpaad* (tortoise) without a shell." And she went out, chuckling, to re-appear in about a minute with the rejected tray.

"*Nouw ja*! that is where *Klein Missis*' place ought to be," began old Sanna, pointing to the other end of the table. "But the Baas piles it up with rubbish and paper, and all sorts of stuff only good to collect dust and tarantulas. But he will have to make room for you soon there, *Klein Missis*. How soon?"

"Don't you ask questions, old Sanna," answered the girl with a laugh. "Meanwhile I prefer sitting here, nearer. We needn't talk so loud then to make each other hear, do you see?"

The old woman's yellow face puckered into delighted wrinkles. She was not altogether free from the failings of her race, but she had a very real and motherly affection for Wyvern, and would in all probability have gone through fire and water for him if put to the test.

"Mind you make the coffee extra well to-day, old Sanna," called out Wyvern, as she turned back to the kitchen.

"Now help me, darling," said the girl, as they sat down to table. "It is delightful, being all to ourselves like this. Isn't it?"

"Heavenly," he answered, dropping a hand upon hers, to the detriment of any speedy compliance with her last injunction. "But how did you manage to get away alone?"

"Father's gone to a sale at the Krumi Post. He won't be back till to-morrow."

Wyvern's face clouded.

"Has he? That accounts for it. Do you know, dearest, he seems to have changed towards me. Not over anxious for you to see too much of me in these days. Well, I know what that is going to mean."

"Hush – hush! I am going to have some serious talk with you presently, but – not now. At table that sort of thing interferes with digestion I believe."

Wyvern dropped his knife and fork, and looked at her fixedly.

"That means – trouble," he said, a world of bitterness in his tone and face.

"No – no. It doesn't. Perhaps quite the reverse. So be reassured! – and trust me. Now tell me. What have you been doing with yourself since we last met?"

"Oh, trying to put more of the too late drag on the coach that is whirling down the hill to its final crash."

"No – no. Don't talk despondently," she said. "I want to think of you as strong – and despondency is not strength. You have me and I have you, does that count for nothing?"

"Good Lord, but you make me feel mean. Come now, we'll throw off this gloomy talk," with a sudden brightening that was not all forced, so stimulating was the effect of her presence, so soothing that of her love-modulated voice.

"That's right. Now, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"The latest is that I had a sort of adventure this morning. I caught Sixpence 'slaag-ing,' caught him red-handed. There was another *schelm* in it with him." And he told her the whole incident.

The colour heightened in her cheeks as she listened, and her eyes were opened wide upon his.

"But they would have killed you, the wretches," she exclaimed.

"Such was their amiable intent. I believe it will take even Sixpence's thick skull some little while to get over that stone I let him have."

"Pity you didn't kill him," said the girl, fiercely; and meaning it too.

"No, dearest. Think again. Are times not hard enough in all conscience, without having to meet the costs of a trial for manslaughter, for that's about what it would have meant. What? 'Self defence?' That might not have counted. There were no witnesses, and they'd have tried to make out I did it because I was mad with him for 'slaag-ing.'"

"That's true. I hadn't thought of it in that light. Well, I should think the magistrate will let him have the 'cat' and plenty of it," she added, vindictively.

"No, he won't. I've concluded to let the poor devil off. I'll deduct the value from his wages – it's quite illegal of course, but far more satisfactory to both parties, in that it saves trouble all round – and the crack on the head he got can balance the rest of the account."

The girl looked at him, a whole world of admiring love shining in her eyes. Then she shook her head.

"That's quite wrong. You're spoiling the people, you know. In fact you're putting quite a premium on 'slaag-ing.' But you will do everything your own way and different to other people. Well, it wouldn't be you if you didn't."

"Which is an extenuating circumstance, I suppose, sweetheart," he answered, dropping a hand on to hers. "And now, if we've done, I move that we go and continue this debate upon the stoep."

Chapter Three.
“Light Through the Gloom…”

We have said that in purchasing Seven Kloofs, as his farm was named, Wyvern had been largely moved by a sense of its beautiful site, and it certainly had that redeeming feature. Now as these two sat there on the stoep, a fair and lovely panorama lay spread forth before them. The house was built on the slope of a hill, and, falling away in front, lay miles and miles of undulating veldt, now of a young and tender green – for the season had been a good one – alternating with darker patches of bush, and the lighter green, still, of the feathery mimosa. While beyond, walling in the river valley at some miles distant, ran a lofty ridge, far as the eye could see, stern with stately cliffs, alternating with the ruggedness of rock and boulder which crowned the height. Behind the homestead a network of dark and bushy kloofs interseamed the hills on that side; which, if a very Alsatia for mischievous wild animals, furnished a compensating element in affording sport to the owner – and his neighbours – in their periodical destruction.

Nor were the voices of Nature stilled in the sensuous glory of the unclouded sunlight. The strange call of strange birds echoed unceasingly, blending with the cheery whistle of the familiar spreeuw, ubiquitous in his sheeny flash from bough to bough, and the far-off, melodious call of the hoepoe, in the dusky recesses of bushy kloofs. Dove notes, too, in ceaseless cooing, and the shrill, noisy crow of cock-koorhaans was seldom stilled, any more than the murmuring hum of bees and the screech of crickets; but Nature’s voices are never inharmonious, and all these, and more, blended to perfection in a chorus of praise for a spring-reviving world.

“No – that is too far from you, dearest,” objected the girl, as Wyvern dragged forward the most comfortable of the cane chairs for her in the vine-trellised shade of the stoep. “Now, you sit there, and I’ll sit – here,” flinging down a couple of cushions beside his low chair, and seating herself thereon so as to nestle against him. “Now we shall be quite comfy, and can talk.”

She had taken from his hand the pouch from which he had begun to fill his pipe, likewise the pipe itself. This she now proceeded to fill for him.

“Aren’t you afraid of quite spoiling me, darling?” he murmured tenderly, passing a caressing hand over the soft brown richness of her abundant hair. “Would you always do it, I wonder?”

She looked up quickly.

“‘Would you,’” she repeated “Oughtn’t you rather to have said ‘Will you’?”

“My sweet grammarian, you have found me the exact and right tense,” he answered, a little sadly, wondering if she really had any approximate idea as to how badly things were going with him.

“That’s right, then. This is getting quite worn out,” examining the pouch. “How long ago did I make it? Well, I must make you another, anyhow.”

“That’ll be too sweet of you.”

“Nothing can be too sweet to be done for you.”

If it be doubted whether all this incense could be good for any one man, we may concede that possibly for many – even most – it would not. But this one constituted an exception. There was nothing one-sided about it, for he gave her back love for love. Moreover, it was good for him; now, especially, when he stood in need of all the comfort, all the stimulus she could give him; for these two were engaged, and he – was tottering on the verge of ruin.

He looked down into her eyes, and their glances held each other. What priceless riches was such a love as this. Ruin! Why ruin was wealth while such as this remained with him. And yet – and yet – Wyvern’s temperament contained but little of the sanguine; moreover he knew his own capabilities, and however high these might or might not stand for ornamental purposes, no one knew better than

he did that for the hard, practical purpose of building for himself a pecuniary position they were *nil*. Nor was he young enough to cherish any illusions upon the subject.

"You said you had some serious talk for me, sweetheart," he said. "Now begin."

"It's about father. He keeps dinning into me that you – that you – are not doing well."

"He's right there," said Wyvern, grimly. "And then?"

"And then – well, I lost my temper."

"You have a temper then?"

She nestled closer to his side, and laid her head against him.

"Haven't I – worse luck!"

He laughed, softly, lovingly.

"Well, I'll risk that. But, why did you lose it?"

"He told me – he said – that things ought not to go on any longer between us," answered the girl, slowly.

"Oh, he said that did he? What if he should be right?"

She started to her feet, and her eyes dilated as she fixed them upon his face; her own turning ghastly white.

"You say that —*you*? *If* he should be right?"

Wyvern rose too. The greyness which had superseded the bronze of his face was an answer to her white one.

"I am ruined," he said. "Is it fair to bind you to a broken and ruined man, one who, short of a miracle, will never be anything else?"

"You mean that? That he might be right?" she repeated.

The ashen hue deepened on his countenance.

"In your own interest – yes. As for me, the day that I realised I should see you no more in the same way, as I see you now – that is as *mine*– would be my last on earth," he said, his voice breaking, in a very abandonment of passion and despair. Then with an effort, "But there. It was cowardly of me to tell you that."

"Oh, love – love!" Now they were locked in a firm embrace, and their lips met again and again. In the reaction great tears welled from her eyes, but she was smiling through them. "Now I am answered," she went on, "I thought I knew what happiness was, but, if possible, I never did until this moment."

"Did you think I was going to give you up then?" he said, a trifle unsteadily.

"Don't ask me what I thought I only know I seem to have lived a hundred years in the last minute or so."

"And I?"

"You too. You have an expressive face, my ideal?"

"Listen, Lalanté. How long have we known each other?"

"Since I first came home. Just a year."

"And how long have we loved each other?"

"Exactly the same time, to a minute."

"Yes. And have we ever had the slightest misunderstanding or exchanged one single word that jarred or rankled?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

"Because of our love – our complete and perfect love."

"Yes. Now we have had our first misunderstanding, but not in the ordinary and derogatory sense in which the word is used – and it has only served to cement us more closely together. Hasn't it?"

"It has."

"Then we will sit down again and talk things over quietly," he said. "You have been standing long enough, after your long, hot ride."

He released her beautiful form from his embrace, though reluctantly, and only then after another clinging kiss. She subsided again on to her cushions.

"After my long, hot ride!" she echoed. "Why, it was nothing. I'm as strong as a horse."

"You are perfect."

"Oh, and all this time you have not even lighted your pipe!" she cried, gleefully, and radiant with smiles as she picked up that homely and comforting implement where he had let it fall. "Now light it up, dearest, and then we will be comfy, and talk."

"Yes. Well then, I suppose your father was rather abusing me on the whole, Lalanté; saying I was doing no good, and so forth. He has been doing that more and more of late. Don't be afraid I shan't mind; nor shall I feel at all ill-disposed towards him on that account."

"I'm sure you won't; first because you are you, secondly because you know that he is utterly powerless to part us. Well then, he said again that your affairs were rapidly going from bad to worse, and that you would never do any good for yourself or anybody else."

"As for the first he's right. For the second – I'm not so sure."

Wyvern spoke with a new confidence that was a little strange to himself – a confidence begotten of the very trust and confidence which this girl had shown in him. His love for her thrilled every fibre of his body and soul. Now that he knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that nothing on earth could part them – and he did know it now – a new, and as we have said, a strange confidence and self-reliance had been born within him.

She, for her part, laughed – laughed lightly, happily.

"But I am," she answered. "For instance you have done a great deal of good for *me*. You have turned my days into a sunlight of bliss, and my nights into a dream beside which Heaven might pale. Is that nothing?"

"Child – child!" he said, still passing his hand caressingly over the soft luxuriance of her hair. "Will it last – will it last? Remember you are enthroning a poor sort of idol after all. What then?"

Again she laughed! – lightly, happily.

"What then? Last? Oh, you'll see. You are a bit older than me, darling, but even you don't know everything – no, not quite everything."

The mocking face was turned up, radiant in the love-light of its obsession. Upon the rich, full lips he dropped his own. And the golden glory from above warmed down upon a shining world in its wild splendour here of forest and waste and cliff, and the joyous voices of Nature echoed their multitudinous but ever blending notes. The glow of Heaven lay upon all, and its peace upon two hearts.

"No, I do not know everything," he said at last, "for I did not know that the whole world could contain one like you."

Her fingers, intertwined with his, closed upon them in unspoken response. Both seemed to lack heart to revert to more serious and mundane talk in the happiness of the hour; and in God's name, why should they, seeing that such hours can come to few, and then but seldom in a lifetime?

"*Baas. Myn lieve Baas*?"

"What do you want, old Sanna?" said Wyvern, frowning at the interruption, yet not moving. "Go away. You are disturbing us."

"But *myn Baas*," persisted the old woman, deprecatorily. "I think something must be dead – there – down by the river. The aasvogels are like a very cloud."

"I don't care if something is dead," he answered. "I don't care if all the world were dead – in fact I wish it was. So go away and don't come bothering me again until I call you."

She obeyed, not in the least huffy. Romance appeals to all natures and nationalities and ages, and even this semi-civilised old scion of a very inferior race was not impervious to a sympathetic heart-warming over the situation.

"Let's go and see what she means, dearest," said Lalanté after the old woman had gone. "I feel as if I should like to move a little, and – are we not still together?"

They went round to the angle of the house, whence they could see to the point indicated. The great scavengers of the air were wheeling and circling in hundreds, away down by the river bank, white and fleecy against the cloudless blue.

"They must have found that wretched Kafir," said the girl. "Isn't that somewhere about where he'd be lying?"

"Yes. But they wouldn't be able to get at him. He fell into a part of the *donga* which is entirely sheltered by bush and prickly pears. What they have found is the mutton, which in the delight of your arrival I clean forgot to send someone to fetch."

She pressed to her side the hand which lay passed through her arm, and they stood for a little, watching the great white scavengers in the distance.

"I could almost find it in me to vow never to kill another puff-adder after the service that one rendered me," went on Wyvern. "I had a tough contract on hand, and that other fellow was big and powerful, and had a business-like sort of knife. The stone trick might not have worked out so well twice running."

"Darling, don't take any more of those foolish risks. Why don't you carry a pistol?"

"Oh, it's heavy and therefore hot. I shall have bother enough now over that wretched Kafir. There'll be an inquest and so on. By the way, I shall have to notify your father about the affair. He's the nearest Field-cornet."

"That's all right. You can come over to-morrow and tell him, then we shall see each other two days running, or rather three – for of course you must stop the night."

"He won't ask me. I'm out of favour, remember."

"Won't he? Well, if he doesn't I will; and I think I know who's *Baas* in household arrangements of that kind."

Both laughed. "I think I do," Wyvern said. "Now let's go round to the stable and see to your horse. It's not very far from counting-in time – worse luck."

"Ah, yes. How time gallops. Now, you will be wanting to get rid of me."

"That of course."

"Well then, you won't – not just yet that is. I'm going to stay and have supper with you. There's a splendid moon, and you can ride back with me until I'm in sight of the house. How does that appeal?"

"In the way of perfection."

"Same here. I didn't let on I was coming here to-day, but nobody will give me away whatever time I get back, that's one thing."

Chapter Four.
"I will not let him go."

Lalanté's intention of spending the evening with him had come with the effect of a reprieve upon Wyvern. For all his trust in her he never parted with her without vague misgivings that by some means or other it might be for the last time; for did he not hold her in opposition to a growing and decided parental hostility? It would be through no fault of hers, he told himself, were such misgivings justified. With all her strength and resolution, circumstances might be too strong for her, hence the misgiving.

They wandered about, happy for the moment, watching the great rays of the westering sun sweep lower and lower over the green expanse of the river valley – upon which now, the whiteness of returning flocks moved slowly homeward.

"I'm going to leave you to yourself for a little now, dearest," said the girl, as these drew nearer. "I should only be in your way, and disturb your counting. Besides, I feel rather hot and dusty, and want to go and titivate."

"Of course. How stupid of me."

"No – no. You needn't come, old Sanna will get me all I want. Now forget that I exist, for the next few minutes. So long," and with a nod and a bright smile she left him.

Sixpence was looking a very subdued and dejected Kafir as his master finished the count of his particular flock; which was accurate – save for one.

"I have been thinking over your case, Sixpence," began Wyvern, when the other boy had been dismissed, "and even now haven't quite made up my mind what to do about it."

"*Nkose*!" exclaimed the Kafir, deprecatorily, and sorely exercised in his mind. It was no unknown thing under the circumstances to give the culprit the option of receiving a dozen or so well laid on with a new *reim*, or taking his chance before the nearest Resident Magistrate; an arrangement on the whole satisfactory to both parties, in that the offender got off far more lightly than he would have got off at the hands of the law, and his employer was saved a great deal of trouble and some incidental expense. This, then, Sixpence feared, was the least he could expect, but he need not have, for Wyvern was utterly incapable of an act of violence in cold blood, and very rarely in hot.

"You see," went on the latter, "I'm not sure that it is in my power to forgive you, even if I wanted to. I'm not sure that the law would not compel me to prosecute. I don't see, either, how we can put the thing away. There's that other fellow lying dead; for he'll be as dead as the sheep you 'slaag-ed' long before this. I shall have to report the whole thing to Baas Le Sage. Then the 'slaag-ing' will all come out."

But the fellow begged and prayed that he might not be sent to the *tronk*. He would make good the loss – over and over again if his master wished. And Wyvern, an appeal to whose soft side had rarely to be repeated, resolved that he would let the poor devil off if he could possibly do so, and said as much.

"When is Miss Lalanté coming here as Missis?" said old Sanna, as the girl, having bathed her face in cool fresh water, came forth looking radiant with its added glow.

"Don't you be too curious, old Sanna," was the answer. "Perhaps soon – perhaps not so soon. Who knows?"

"A Missis is badly wanted here, *ja*, very badly. Look at all that," with a sweep of a yellow hand towards the confused pile of books and papers which had encroached over the greater part of the table. "All that would be cleared away. His letters too. Why the Baas does not even take the trouble to open his letters. Look at them."

The girl's heart tightened. Well she knew why those envelopes remained unopened. Their contents but bore upon the difficulties of their recipient, but in no sense with a tendency to alleviate the same. She forebore to touch the untidy heap lest something he might want to find should be misplaced, but she got a duster, and dusted and straightened the pictures and other things upon the wall. One frame only there was no need for her to dust or straighten. It was the one which contained her own portrait: and realising this a very soft, sweet smile came over her face. At which psychological moment Wyvern re-entered.

"I notice this is the only thing you allow old Sanna to dust," she said ingenuously. "How many times a week is she under orders to do it?"

"You shall pay for that," he answered. "There. Now you have done so duly, you shall own that you knew perfectly well that nobody ever touches it but me."

"*Oh, goeije*! it is as if there were really a Missis here at last."

The interruption came from old Sanna, who at that moment entered, bringing in the dishes. Both laughed.

"See, old Sanna," said Wyvern. "We are rather tired of that remark. So if you can't invent a new one don't make any."

"Better to be tired of that than of the Missis," chuckled the old woman, as she withdrew. It will be seen that she was rather a privileged person.

The evening slipped by all too soon for these two, as they sat out on the stoep, watching the suffusing glow that heralded the rising of the broad moon. In the stillness the voices of night, well-nigh as multifold as the voices of day, were scarcely hushed, and the shrill bay of a jackal away beyond the river, would seem but a distance of yards instead of miles. The weird hoot of some ghostly night bird too, would float ever and anon from the hillside; and the dogs lying around the house would start up and bark in deep-toned, angry chorus, as the harsh shout of sentinel baboons echoed forth from the darksome recesses of the kloofs behind the homestead: or perchance as they detected some other sound, too subtle for human ears.

"How restless everything is to-night," said the girl, listening. "Dearest, it seems a little bit eerie."

"Oh, on a fine still night things always move about more. It may be something stirring up all those baboons – a leopard perhaps – not wild dogs I hope. You know it's one of my hobbies that, being able to hear all sorts of wild animal voices when I sit out here of an evening, or when I am lying awake. It's one of the charms of this place. I wonder if the next man here will say the same."

"Don't. Oh, is there no way out," she cried, in a despairing tone, "no way by which you will not be forced to part with this beautiful place you love so much, and where our lives were to have passed in a very paradise? No way?"

"None."

Then both sat in silence, fingers intertwined. A rim of gold peered up from behind the dark outline of the opposite *rand*, then a broad disc, and the great fiery moon soared aloft, penetrating the shadowed recesses of the river valley in a network of silvern gleams. At last Lalanté spoke.

"Dearest, I have to say it, as you know, but – it is time."

"To saddle up? Yes, I'm afraid it is. But it isn't good-bye yet, seeing we shall be together for another hour and a half."

Both had risen. The girl went to find her hat and gloves while Wyvern lighted a waggon lantern and went round to the stable. In his mind was the consciousness of the awful depression that would be upon him during his return ride; when her presence was withdrawn. They would see each other again on the morrow in all probability, but – even then it would be under different circumstances.

The horses, fresh and willing in the cool air, snorted and sidled as their riders fared forth into the peaceful beauty of the radiant night. So fresh were they, indeed, that they could have covered the ten miles that lay before them in far less time than their said riders were disposed to allow them. And the latter were not inclined for hurry. This ride beneath the golden moon, the loom of the heights

against the pale sky near and far, the sweet breaths of night distilling perfume from herb and flower, and they two together – alone. They talked – and the subject of their talk was one that never grew old – that never palled – for it was of the time which had elapsed since they had first met – and loved; and that time was one. Talked, too, of the time preceding; when he had been happy, contented here in his quiet way, because then unconscious that he was already on the road to financial ruin – of her father's arrival two years ago, when he had bought the neighbouring stock farm upon which they now dwelt, and had prospered exceedingly; but, more alluring topic still, of her own arrival home a year later than that.

"And you have never quite forgiven me for admitting that I was prepared – well – not to like you?" he said, when they had reached this point.

"Forgiven you, darling? Why – is not the result a very triumph to me? I knew that it was the moment we first looked at each other."

"Did you? From your side I was not so confident then. But I see you now as you first came into the room – that bright, laughing glance meeting mine, without an atom of *gêne* or self-consciousness. And then – later. We did not have to *say* much: – we knew that we belonged to each other. Didn't we?"

"We did. We did indeed. Sweetheart, will you be very angry with me if I say something that has been on my mind?"

"How can you use that word as between you and me?"

"Well, then – " she went on, strangely hesitatingly for her. "Even if you had to part with Seven Kloofs, and there's no doubt, I'm afraid, that it'll be no good for years – you might get a place you liked just as well I have a little of my own, remember – not much, but all my own – and that, with what you would save from the wreck, would surely be enough to – to set us up again."

She spoke quickly, hurriedly, deprecatingly, as she noted the grave, disapproving look which deepened upon his face in the brilliant moonlight.

"No – no. Lalanté, love, never that. No. Once you hinted that way before – but – no, that could not be."

"Now you hurt me."

"Hurt you – hurt *you*? Child, if you only knew how I am adoring you at this moment, if possible – I say *if* possible – more than ever I have done before. Hurt you? *You*?"

"Now, forgive me. It is I who am hurting you." And her voice quivered in its tenderness of passion as she reached out her hand to him – they were walking their horses now. "But I thought if two people belonged to each other they had everything in common."

"Not at this stage, I'm afraid," he said, with a smile that was meant to be reassuring, but was only sad. "You know I have a certain code of my own."

"It would be a cruel one if it was not yours," she answered. But there was nothing of resentment in the tone, only pride, admiration, an intense glory of possession. Nor did she intend to abandon the argument, only to postpone it.

As they had said, they had known from the very first that they belonged to each other. It was as surely a case of coming together as the meeting of two converging rivers; and the process had been as easy, as natural. What had drawn her towards him – apart from his physical attractions, which were not slight, and of which, to do him justice, he was free from any consciousness – was his total dissimilarity to any other man she had ever met. She had told him so more than once – and the reply had been deprecatory. Other men got on, he declared, while he – only seemed to get back; dissimilarity, therefore, was rather a hindrance than a thing to plume oneself upon.

"We are nearly there now," he said, regretfully, as the track they had been pursuing here merged in a broader main road.

"Yes. But what a day we have had. Hasn't it been too sweet?"

"Too sweet indeed! A day to look back upon to the very end of one's life."

A couple of miles further and they topped a rise. In the stillness the sudden barking of dogs was borne to their ears. It came from where two or three iron roofs glinted in the moonlight some three-quarters of a mile on the further side of the valley. Both dismounted, for the rest of the way she was to finish alone.

"Good-bye now, my own love, my sweet," he murmured as they stood, locked together in a last long embrace. "I shall see you to-morrow, but it will not be as it has been to-day."

"Not quite. But we will have other days like this. And – keep up heart – remember, for my sake. When you are disposed to lose it, think of me and feel sure that nothing can part us – as sure as that moon is shining. Good-bye, my love. It is only 'good-night,' though."

No more was said, as he swung her into the saddle. He himself stood there watching her fast receding form, nor did he leave the spot until the sudden subsidence of the canine clamour, told that she had reached her home.

Then he mounted, and took his way slowly back through the moonlit glories of the beautiful slumbering waste.

Chapter Five.
Rebellion

Vincent Le Sage was riding leisurely homeward to his farm in the Kunaga River Valley.

His way lay down a stony bush road, winding along a ridge – whence great kloofs fell away on either side, clothed in thick, well-nigh impenetrable bush. Here and there a red krantz with aloe-fringed brow rose up, bronze-gleaming in the morning sun, and away below, in front, and on either hand, the broad river valley into which he was descending.

He was a middle-aged man, of medium height, but tough and wiry. He had good features and his short beard was crisp and grizzled, but the expression of his eyes was cold and business-like, as indeed it was bound to be if there is anything in the science of physiognomy, for he was a byword as being a hard nail at a deal, and everything he touched prospered. In fact his acquaintance near and far were wont to say that Le Sage had never made a bad bargain in his life. Perhaps they were right, but Le Sage himself, now as a turn of the road brought some objects in sight, was more than inclined to question that dictum.

The said objects were only some cattle, a most ordinary everyday sight, and the cattle were not even his. Yet a frown came over his face. The cattle were poor, and one or two, to his experienced eyes, showed signs of disease.

"Wyvern's, of course!" he pronounced to himself wrathfully. "Every case of redwater or *brand-ziekte* in the whole country-side is sure to be traceable to Wyvern's cattle or sheep. What the devil could have put into such a fellow's head that he was any good in the world at fanning? He'd better stick to his fusty books and become a damned professor. That's about all he's good for. I doubt if he's even good for that I doubt if he's even good for anything."

These wrathful reflections were due to the fact that he had just met with a reminder – one of many – that he had at any rate made one bad bargain, for Wyvern was engaged to his daughter; and now it was a question only of months perhaps, when Wyvern should be sold up.

Then and there he made up his mind again that the engagement should be broken off, and yet while so making it up – we said "again" – the same misgiving that had haunted him on former occasions did so duly and once more, that the said breaking off would be a matter of no little difficulty even were it ever achieved at all. Wyvern might be a bad fanner, a hopeless one in fact, but he would be a hard nut to crack in a matter of this kind, and Lalanté – well, here was a hard and fast alliance for the offensive and defensive, which would require a breaking power such as he could not but realise to himself he scarcely possessed.

On rode Vincent Sage, mile after mile, still frowning. The good bargain he had made at yesterday's ale had well-nigh faded from his thoughts now, and as he drew near to his home his private worries seemed to oust his professional satisfaction over his own acuteness and the steady but sure accumulation of the goods of this world. He had liked Wyvern well enough during the earlier period of their acquaintance – in fact more than well enough; but he had all the invariably successful man's impatience of – even contempt for – the chronically unsuccessful; and in this particular instance his oft repeated dictum to himself – and sometimes to others – was "Wyvern will never do any good for himself or for anybody else either."

Suddenly he pulled up his horse with a jerk, and emitted a whistle. He was scanning the road, scanning it intently.

"Oh-ho! So that's how the cat jumps!" he exclaimed to himself, grimly.

He had reached the point where the track to Wyvern's farm joined the wider road leading to his own. The frown became more of a set one than ever.

"One horse spoor coming this way alone," he pronounced, "and I know what horse made that spoor. Two horse spoors going back – and the same horse made one of these spoors. That's the game, is it, directly my back is turned? Well, it's a game that must be stopped, and, damn it – it shall be."

In spite of which vehemence, however, that same little cold water misgiving returned to render Vincent Le Sage's mind uncomfortable.

He rode on, slowly now, keeping his horse at a walk; he was near home and there was no occasion for hurry. But as he went, he read that road like the pages of a book. He would find Wyvern at his place? Not a bit of it. For he had marked the returning spoors of the other horse.

Then again he reined in, suddenly and shortly, for the horse-hoofs had ceased and with them mingled the print of boots – and the said boots spelt one of each sex. From that point the spoor of one horse continued alone. The other was a returning one. This, then, was where they had parted.

Vincent Le Sage had every sign of the veldt at his fingers' ends, and here, these imprints on a scantily used road, were as the very elementary side of his craft to him. They had not been made to-day; there were evidences of the effect of dew to show that. They had been made yesterday, and tolerably late at night; that too, he took in, and doing so felt more than ever justified in his resentment. What on earth had Lalanté come to that she should ride over, alone, to this man's place directly his own back was turned, and – return with him late at night? Now he had good ground for interference, and what his inner consciousness told him was still better, a just grievance against Wyvern.

"He'll be sold up," he said to himself in hot wrath, as he covered the short distance which still lay between him and his homestead. "He'll be sold up, and I'll buy the place – I will, by God, even if it's the only rotten bargain I ever made in my life. I won't leave the chance to any other fool, with some arrangement perhaps for keeping him on on the halves. No – I'll buy it myself – although it won't be worth a tinker's twopenny damn for years to come. Then he'll have to clear, and that's what I want."

A Hottentot stable boy ran to take his horse as he dismounted at the gate. Lalanté came down the garden path to meet him. Her greeting of him was unreservedly affectionate. Perhaps his own to her thawed more than he was aware of.

"Come along in, father dear," she cried, hooking her arm within his, and drawing him through the open door into the cool room beyond. "And tell me how you got on. But first of all, you must have something after your ride," unlocking a cupboard and producing a decanter of excellent Boer brandy. "Now, did you pick up anything worth having?"

"Not bad in a small way. Couple of dozen slaughter-oxen of Piet Nel's – he's in a bad way, you know, and obliged to sell I can turn them down upon Hartslief at Gydisdorp, at an easy two pound a head profit, if not more. There was nothing else quite worth taking on. Warren'll do the delivery for me on very small commission."

He had thawed still more as he watched his daughter moving about, ministering to his comfort. Any preconceived idea that Vincent Le Sage was of the tyrannical order of parent may at once be jettisoned. He was – as we have said – simply intolerant, to a fault, of the unsuccessful man.

"Warren?" repeated Lalanté, in some astonishment, as she placed the porous terra-cotta water-bottle wits its fresh, cool contents upon the table. "Was Mr Warren at the sale then?"

"No. I came back by his place."

There was a something in her father's tone, and the searching glance he threw upon her face as he said this, that struck the girl as strange. She had not expected him back by that particular way, but she failed to connect the circumstance with her doings of the day before. The mysteries of spoor, of course, were rather outside her scope.

"Oh, did you?" was all she said. "A little further round, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I had business with him – this and other. Where are the kiddies, Lalanté?"

"Oh, they're larking about down the kloof, catapulting birds, or something."

"All the better. I want to have some serious talk with you."

"Serious? Don't scare me, old chap, will you?" she answered, going to him, and taking his face between her long cool fingers. "Because I'm easily scared, and 'serious' sounds so unconscionably alarming."

Le Sage felt more than ever disarmed. He was glowing angry with himself, and in proportion felt the less inclined to be so with her. His heart swelled with pride and love, as he met the half-laughing, half-wistful eyes of this beautiful, splendid girl of his. How the devil could he get out what he wanted to say, he asked himself savagely? But the thought of Wyvern came to his aid. With him, at any rate, he felt desperately angry.

"What time did you get back last night?" he said, shortly.

It was Lalanté's turn to feel disconcerted.

"Last night? Get back?" she repeated, changing colour ever so slightly.

"Yes. That's what I said," he answered, still more shortly, and inwardly lashing himself up. "What time?"

"Well, it wasn't so very late," replied the girl, serenely. She had had time to pick herself up, though it cost her an effort, while wondering who had given her away; though indeed who could have done so, seeing that she herself had met her father at the gate before he had spoken to anybody? "But there was a fine bright moon – almost at the full."

"Well, you have done a thing I entirely disapprove of. You had no business to go over there all by yourself like that, at night."

"But I didn't go at night. I went in the morning."

"But you came back at night. At least if you didn't I'm a raw Britisher at reading spoor. How's that?"

Spoor? Oh, this was what had given her away then. This was a factor Lalanté had wholly omitted to take into account, and even if she had not she had never reckoned on her father returning by that particular road at all.

"How's that?" she repeated sweetly. "Why of course that you're not a raw Britisher at all."

"Surely you must see it isn't the thing for a girl to go and spend the day with a man at his own place all alone," he fumed. "Can't you see that?"

"It depends on the girl and the man," she answered demurely. "Not if they are engaged?"

"Not even then. Coming back late at night too. I'm surprised at Wyvern being a party to it; and shall let him have a bit of my mind next time I see him."

"Oh, don't blame him," said Lalanté, rather quickly. "I paid him a surprise visit, and – and – well, under the circumstances I stopped on. *I* stopped on. He couldn't very well turn me out. Now could he?"

Le Sage snorted. He had no reply ready. The shrewd practical farmer, the hard-headed man of business, was floundering more and more hopelessly out of his depth here.

"Were you never young once, father?" said the girl in her softest tone, bending over him and sliding an arm round his shoulders.

"Young? Young? Well, Wyvern's not particularly young at any rate, and ought to have known better." Then, bitterly, "I wish to God we'd never set eyes on him."

The arm was removed.

"You didn't always wish that. You thought a great deal of him once."

"That was before I found out he was no good," retorted Le Sage, who had succeeded in lashing himself up again. "Pity, while you were about it, if you must go in for – for leaving me – you didn't fix upon some solid and sensible fellow like Warren, for instance, instead of a mere dreamer. Warren's worth fifty of such wasters as that."

The "leaving me" had softened the girl, but the opprobrious term applied to her *fiancé* had been as the one nail that driveth out another.

"Don't call him names," she said, coldly, not angrily, thanks to her power of self-control. "He has been unfortunate, but he is the most honourable man who ever lived. The word 'waster' doesn't apply."

"Oh, I'm not saying anything against his honour," snapped her father. "But the fact remains that he has never done any good for himself and never will. He's no chicken, mind; he can't be so very many years younger than myself. And when a man of his age gets to that age and is – well, where Wyvern is, the chances are a thousand to one he never picks himself up again. How's that?"

"How's that? It isn't."

"Isn't it. Well, then, Lalanté, now we're well on the subject I want you to understand that this affair between you and him had better be broken off. In fact it must be broken off."

The girl was standing erect and her face had gone white. The large, dark-lashed grey eyes had something of a snap in them.

"It's too late for that now," she answered. "It cannot and shall not be broken off, no never. As long as he lives I will cling to him, and the more unfortunate he is the more I will cling to him. He is – my life."

Le Sage's face had gone white too – at least as far as the weather-beaten bronze was capable of doing – white with anger.

"So that's your answer?" he said.

"That's my answer."

For a moment they gazed at each other. Then, before a reply could come, a sound without struck upon the ears of both. It was the creaking sound made by the swing of a gate upon its hinges. Both faces turned to the window. Coming up the path between the orange trees was Wyvern himself.

Whereby it is manifest that infinite potentialities lay within the space of the next half-hour.

Chapter Six.
What they did not find

"How are you, Le Sage?" said Wyvern, as his father-in-law elect met him in the doorway. "You look worried. Anything wrong?"

"Don't know. No – er, well no," as they shook hands. They had been very friendly before Lalanté had appeared upon the scene, and even afterwards, Le Sage had a sneaking weakness for the other, but what he could not pardon was what he termed the other's incapacity. A man might have ill-luck and pick himself up again, but this one, he told himself, was incapable of that. Nor did it carry any soothing effect that Lalanté went straight to him and kissed him openly and affectionately.

"How glad I am to see you, darling," she said, a sunny light in her eyes as she looked at him. Le Sage grunted to himself, but it did not escape Wyvern. Something of warning too in Lalanté's eyes did not escape him either.

"Father is only just back from the sale at Krumi Post," she went on, "and although he did a good stroke of business there he's come back grumpy. Well now it's just dinner-time and you'll all be better after that."

Wyvern was quick to take in that something was wrong, but it never occurred to him to connect it with the doings of the day before. He set it down rather to the general disapproval of himself which had become more and more manifest of late in the demeanour of his quondam friend. There might have been an awkwardness but that Lalanté took care never to leave them alone together.

"Did anyone take your horse, dear?" she said. "Because, if not, I can send someone to shout for Piet."

"That's all right, Piet took him from me at the gate. Well, Le Sage – what did you do at the sale?"

The other told him, thawing a bit. Then, when they sat down to table, Wyvern opened the story of the slaughtering incident, and the tragic end of one of the actors therein. But of the attack of both upon himself he said nothing.

"A most infernal nuisance," grumbled Le Sage. "I don't know why I was fool enough to allow myself to be nominated Field-cornet. Well, if one of the *schepsels* has cheated the 'cat' the other's all there for it, that's one consolation."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm going to let the poor devil off."

"Going to – what?" snapped Le Sage. "Oh, look here, Wyvern, really you're getting past a joke. A fellow like you is a nuisance to the whole community. Why it's putting a premium on 'slaag-tag.' You catch this swine red-handed – a clear case for the 'cat' – and then say you're going to let him off. It isn't fair to the rest of us. Don't you see that?"

As a matter of fact Wyvern did see it; and felt a little uncomfortable.

"Perhaps you're right, Le Sage," he said. "But I'm too soft-hearted I suppose, and the sight of that other wretched devil, with that beastly snake tied round his leg, squirting blue death into him with every bite, is a sight I shan't get rid of all in a hurry. And one human life, even that of a Kafir, is about expiation enough for a miserable sheep, worth eighteen bob or a pound at the outside. Eh?"

"I never heard such rot in my life," was the answer. "All the more reason why the other chap's hide should be made to smart for the whole mischief. Eh? Aren't I right, Lalanté?"

A spirit of cussedness made him thus appeal to his daughter, a sort of longing to make her espouse his side against this other. But, even as he did so, he realised that he might as well have spared himself the trouble.

"No. I don't think you are, since you put it to me," she answered unhesitatingly. "On the contrary, I think you'd do much better to go and hold your enquiry and leave the other part of the business alone altogether."

"The devil you do!"

"That's it. You've put it exactly, father," laughed Lalanté; "You'll be riding over there after dinner, I suppose. Well, I'll go with you."

He expostulated. It was no place for a girl. The sight of a dead Kafir was no sight for her, he pointed out with some show of reason.

"But I've no intention of seeing any such sight," she objected serenely. "I'll wait for you a little way off while you make your investigations. That'll be all right."

Wyvern caught one swift look which rejoiced his heart. She had resolved not to let the whole afternoon go by without him if she could be with him. But there was more beneath her plan than he suspected. She did not mean to afford her father any opportunity of quarrelling with him, as he almost certainly would, in his then mood, if they were alone together for any space of time just then. In most things Lalanté contrived to get her own way.

Now with a rush and a racket, two small boys came tumbling in, hot and ruddy with their scramblings about the veldt. Each exhibited, in triumph, a bunch of long feathers from the tail of the mouse-bird, or rather of many mouse-birds; the spoil of their bow and spear – or rather, catapults.

"Here you are, dad. You're set up in pipe-cleaners now for some time to come. Hullo, Mr Wyvern. There'll be enough for you too."

They chucked the feathers down unceremoniously upon the table, and began to draw up chairs. But Lalanté interposed.

"No. No you don't, Charlie – Frank – away you go, and do the soap and basin trick. I'm not going to have you sitting down to table straight out of the veldt," she said decisively. "Come – scoot – do you hear?"

"Oh, all right. Man – Mr Wyvern, but there's a big troop of guinea-fowl down by the second *draai*. I hope you brought your gun."

"Did I say 'Scoot'?" repeated Lalanté, the disciplinarian.

They lingered no further after that. They were good-looking boys, with their sister's large grey eyes. In a trice they were back again, keeping things lively with their chatter, and the girl encouraged them. There was thunder in the air, she recognised, and her main anxiety was to avert the impending storm. And afterwards, before she retired to put on her riding-gear, she managed to impress upon the two youngsters that they were to help entertain their guest for all they knew how until her return, which duty – Wyvern being a prime favourite with them – was not an onerous one; moreover with them Lalanté's word was law.

Their ride forth was not exactly a success. Lalanté, bright, beautiful, sparkling, kept up a flow of laughing quips, but the more she did so, the more gloomy – grumpy she called it – did her father become. Wyvern, riding by her side, felt all aglow with the pride of possession as he noted every fascinating little trick of speech, or manner, or pose, all absolutely natural and unaffected, and all going to make up the very complete charm of her personality. Not for the first time either did he find himself marvelling how this pride of possession should be his at all. Though only in the early twenties Lalanté had had time and opportunity for "experiences," but such experiences, however disquieting to the other parties to them, had left her unscathed. She had come to him heart-whole. None before him had ever had power to awaken her. That had been reserved for him, and the awakening had been mutual from the very first.

"We'd better leave the horses here, Le Sage," suggested Wyvern as they drew near the *donga* wherein the unfortunate Kafir would be lying. "It'll be cool for Lalanté under these trees, and the place is only a hundred yards further. Moreover we shall have to scramble a bit to get to it."

Le Sage glumly assented, cursing the bother of the whole business. He had just got home off a journey and here he was, lugged out over miles of veldt because an infernal fool of a nigger had got bitten by a snake. The Field-cornet job wasn't good enough at that price, and he'd chuck it.

Thus grumbling, he followed Wyvern in what was literally a scramble, not always free from danger either; for the river bank along the face of which they had to make their way here was steep enough to be almost precipitous, and high enough to render a fall on to the stones below a contingency not to be contemplated with equanimity. But fortune favoured them, and they gained their objective without accident.

"*Magtig*! what a beastly hole," grunted Le Sage, as they stood within the mouth of the donga. "Well, the brute must be pretty far gone by this time. Sss! I can smell him already. We'd better start our pipes, Wyvern."

They were standing at the bottom of a narrow rift some thirty feet in depth, its sides narrowing walls of a sandy-clayey soil and looking uncomfortably suggestive of the possibility of falling in upon them. A close network of boughs and prickly pear plants overhead well-nigh shut off the light of day, turning the place into a regular cavern. A little further and the walls narrowed, necessitating single file progress.

"A devilish unpleasant place to find oneself confronted in by a *kwai geel slang*,"[1] said Wyvern – who was leading – over his shoulder, grimly. "We couldn't dodge him at any price here."

"Yes, yes. But what about the nigger?" said the other testily. "Where the devil is he?"

The same idea had struck Wyvern, who had stopped, and after looking in front was now gazing upwards in most unfeigned amazement.

"Where the devil indeed," he echoed. "Look, Le Sage. There's the hole he made in the green stuff tumbling through. Prickly pear leaves too, broken off by the fall. But – where the devil is the chump himself? He ought to be here, but isn't."

This was indisputable. The precipitous banks of the place were marked and scored, and leaves and twigs, obviously freshly torn, still clung to the said banks here and there. Some heavy body had manifestly fallen down there at that spot, but of any such thing there was now no other sign.

"Oh, look here, Wyvern. Haven't you been filling us up with some sick old yarn?" said Le Sage disgustedly. "Why, man, there's no sign of any dead nigger here. Sure your imagination didn't play you tricks?"

"Oh, very. No mistake about that – by the way weren't you saying just now you could smell him?" good-humouredly. "What if some of his pals came and carted him away?"

"Then there'd be spoor, and plenty of it. As it is there's none. And I do know a little about spoor," added Le Sage significantly.

"Well it bangs me, I own," declared Wyvern. "But now we're here we'd better follow the ditch right up. I don't feel like taking on that nasty scramble again, do you?"

"No. Drive ahead then."

Proceeding with some caution, for it was just the place in which to come upon a snake, they made their way gradually upward and soon stood within the open light of day.

"Well, my imagination didn't play me tricks this shot," said Wyvern, as they stood looking at the bones of the slaughtered sheep, picked clean by aasvogels and jackals.

"No. There were two of them at this job. I can see that plainly enough," said Le Sage, scrutinising the ground. "Well, we've had our ride for nothing. The first essential towards holding an inquiry on a dead nigger is for there to be a dead nigger to hold it on, and there isn't one here."

"Well, I own it bangs me," said Wyvern, puzzled.

"So it does me," said Le Sage, significantly.

[1] The *geel slang*, anglice "yellow-snake," is a variety of cobra, and takes first rank among the deadliest reptiles of South Africa.

Chapter Seven.
A Scare – And a Home Circle

"Well, Lalanté. Wyvern's snake-bitten Kafir has not only killed himself, but he has performed his own funeral into the bargain – at least, he must have, because there's no sign of him down there. Why – what's the row?"

There was a curious, startled look upon the girl's face – hearing the sound of their voices she had come forward to meet them. She was pale, too, as from the effects of a fright.

"What scared you, dearest?" said Wyvern anxiously – he was at her side in a moment. "Not another snake?"

"No. I believe it was a Kafir."

"A Kafir?" echoed Le Sage. "Hullo, Wyvern. Your snake-bitten chap has not only performed his own funeral but he has already begun to walk."

"Come over to where I was sitting," said the girl. "I can show you better from there."

"But hang it, Lalanté, you're not the one to be scared by the sight of a Kafir," said her father, incredulously.

"This one had an awful look," she answered, with a little shudder. "Hardly human – almost like someone dead."

She had been leading the way – it was only a few yards – to where she had been seated under the shade of some willows.

"Look," she said. "It was over that prickly pear stem. Something made me look up and I saw a head – a fearful-looking black head, not like anything in life. It was glaring at me with such an awful expression, I wonder I didn't scream, but I believe I was afraid even to do that. Then it sank down again and disappeared."

The point indicated might have been a couple of dozen yards distant Wyvern, pressing her hand, felt that she was in a state of tremble.

"Come along, Wyvern. We'll look into this," said Le Sage irritably. He was a man who hated mystery, and was incredulous as regarded this one. "If there is any mad Kafir hanging about here a touch of stirrup iron'll be the best remedy should he prove obstreperous." And so saying he went to his horse's side and detached one of the stirrups. Now a stirrup iron in the hands of one who knows how to use it, is a very formidable weapon of offence or defence.

"But I'll go too," said the girl, quickly. "I'm dead off staying here by myself after that experience."

"Quite sure it was an *experience*?" queried her father, somewhat sourly.

But reaching the place she had pointed out, there was no sign of anybody having stood there. Le Sage's first instinct was to examine the ground. He looked up again, baffled.

"No trace of any spoor whatever," he said irritably. "No living being could have stood there and left none – let alone coming here and getting away again. Your imagination is very much on the warpath to-day, Lalanté."

"Just as you like," she answered, piqued. "Only, I was never credited with such a vivid imagination before."

She felt hurt. She really had been badly frightened. The comforting pressure of Wyvern's hand was inexpressibly sweet to her at that moment.

"Oh, well. We'll just take a cast further round," said Le Sage… "No, just as I thought;" he added, after this operation. "My dear child, your spectral Kafir must have vanished into thin air. He certainly couldn't have done so over hard firm ground and left no trace whatever."

"Well, here are two deuced odd things," pronounced Wyvern. "First of all, the chap who was bitten again and again by a puff-adder, and should have been lying down there in an advanced stage of – well – unpleasantness, isn't there at all. The next, Lalanté, who isn't easily frightened, meets with a bad scare at sight of something which sounds uncommonly like the deceased defaulter when last I saw him."

"Yes – it's rum – very," declared Le Sage drily, replacing the stirrup he had taken off his saddle. "Well, good-bye, Wyvern."

"What's that?" said Lalanté, decisively. "Goodbye? But he's going back with us. Aren't you, dear? I shall be most frightfully disappointed if you don't."

The glance she shot at him – her father was busy lighting his pipe – expressed love, entreaty, the possibility of disappointment, all rolled into one. Wyvern would not have been human if he had withstood it. As a matter of fact he had no wish to, but Le Sage's manner was such that the words seemed to convey a broad hint that to that worthy at any rate his room was preferable to his company. But he was not going to take any marching orders from Le Sage.

"Then that you most certainly shall not be," he said, cheerfully, returning, to the full, the girl's loving glance.

"Of course not," she rejoined, brightly. "I had arranged a little programme in my own mind, and you are to stay the night. It seems to me we have not seen half enough of each other lately. Well, it's time to remedy that and I propose we begin now."

Inwardly Le Sage was furious. He rode on in front grimly silent, but it was little enough those two minded that as they wended over the golden glory of the sunlit plains – together. Together! Yes, and the word covered a haven of rest to both, for then it was that all the world – with its worries and anxieties and apprehensions – was a thing outside. Yet from the point of view of Le Sage there was a good deal to be said. He was not a demonstrative man, this one, who enjoyed the repute of never having made a bad bargain in his life; yet in his heart of hearts he had a very soft place for this beautiful only daughter of his, and the secret of his rancour lay in the fact that he resented her leaving him at all – or at any rate for some time to come. It was unreasonable, he would candidly allow to himself – but the feeling was there. She had brightened his home and his life, and now she was prepared – even anxious – to cease doing both – to leave him at the call of an outside stranger of whose very existence barely a year ago she had hardly been aware. Had it been a man of solid gifts and substantial position upon whom she had bestowed her love, it would have been a gilding of the pill; but she had chosen to throw herself away upon a "waster" – as his favourite and wrathful epithet put it – one on the verge of insolvency, and without the requisite faculties for righting himself – ah, that rendered the potion a very black and nauseous one to the universally successful man.

Now as he rode, in gloomy silence, the laugh, and quip, and tender tone of the pair behind him, was as fuel to the fire of his anxiety to give Wyvern his *congé*, and that in unmistakable terms. He had made up his mind to do this, from the moment he had looked and had seen him coming in at the gate, but Lalanté had taken care they should never be alone together. Well, he would do it – not to-day but to-morrow morning, and if no opportunity occurred he would make one; point-blank if need be. A "waster" like that, who couldn't even keep himself!

"Hullo, Le Sage. You seem a bit off colour," cried Wyvern genially, ranging up alongside, as they topped the last rise, wherefrom the homestead came into view about a mile in front. "It really was a beastly shame to lug you off on that fool's errand after the long ride of it you had had."

"Oh, I'm all right. It's all in the day's job, and I'm as tough as wire, thank the Lord. Is that confounded vermin-preserve behind your place as full as ever, Wyvern? It's about time you killed some of it off, isn't it?"

The reference was to the network of rugged bushy kloofs of which mention has been made, and which were specially adapted for the harbouring of various forms of wild life, antipathetic and detrimental to stock.

"Well, I think it is, now you mention it," was the answer. "We might get up a big hunt next week. You'll come, won't you? Come the day before and sleep the night. Bring Lalanté too, and the youngsters."

"Don't know. I'm going to be jolly busy next week," was the answer, the speaker grimly wondering whether their relations even next day would still be such as to render any arrangement of the kind possible.

And so they reached home.

It must be recorded of Lalanté Le Sage that she had no "accomplishments." She could not play three notes, she declared, neither did she sing, though the voice in which she trilled forth odd snatches naturally and while otherwise occupied, seemed to show that she might have done so had she chosen. Drawing and painting too, were equally out of her line. She had had enough of that sort of thing at school she would explain, and was not going to be bothered with it any more. On the other hand she had a remarkably shrewd and practical mind, and her management of her father's house was perfect. So also was that of her two small brothers, who, by the way, were only her half brothers, Le Sage having twice married – the first time at an unusually early age. Them she ruled with a rule that was absolute, and – they adored her. Her orders admitted of no question, and still they adored her. Was there one of their boyish interests and pursuits – from the making of a catapult to the most thrilling details of the last blood-and-thunder scalping story they had been reading – into which she did not enter? Not one. And when the question arose of sending them away to school, it was Lalanté who declared in her breezy, decisive way that they were still too small, and what did it matter if they were behind other kiddies of their age in matters of history and geography? They would soon pick it all up afterwards. For her part she never could see what was the advantage of learning a lot of stuff about all those rascally old kings who chopped off everybody's head who had ever been useful to them. That was about all that history consisted of so far as she remembered anything of it. Geography – well, that of course was of some use – might be, rather, for as taught in school it seemed to consist of what were the principal towns of all sorts of countries none of them were ever likely to see in their lives, and whether this particular place was noted for the manufacture of carpets, or that for the production of bone-dust. As for the "three R's" she herself had given the youngsters an elementary grounding there, which was about all she was capable of doing, she declared frankly, with her bright laugh – indeed, she wondered that she was even capable of doing that.

Lalanté's order of beauty was extremely hard to define, but it was there for all that. Hers were no straight classical features; the contour of the face was rather towards roundness, and the cupid-bow mouth was not small, but it was tempting in repose, and perfectly irresistible when flashing into a frequent and brilliant smile. It was a face that was provoking in its contradictoriness – the lower half, mobile, mischievous, fun-loving: while the steady straight glance of the large grey eyes, and the clearly marked brows, spelt "character" writ in capitals. It seemed, too, as if Nature had been undecided whether to create her fair or dark, and had given up the problem half way, for there was a golden sheen in the light brown hair, which the warmth of colouring that would come and go beneath the clear skin almost seemed to contradict.

All of which Wyvern was going over in his own mind, for the hundredth time, as on this particular evening he sat watching her, deciding, not for the first time either, that if there was one situation more than another in which she seemed at her very best, it was here in her home circle. He was not talking much; Le Sage was drowsy and inclined to nod. However, he was more than content to sit there revelling in the sheer contemplation of her – now helping to amuse the small boys, now running a needle through a few stitches of work, now throwing a bright smile or some laughing remark across to him. Then, having at length packed the youngsters off to bed, she was free for a long, delightful chat – Le Sage was snoring audibly by this time. It was an evening – one of many – that he would remember to the end of his life, and no instinct or presentiment seemed to warn him that it might be the last of the kind he was destined to experience. At last Le Sage snored so violently

that he woke himself, and, jumping up, pronounced it time to turn in – which indisputably it was. But the announcement brought a certain amount of relief to Lalanté, for she had not been without anxiety on the ground of leaving the two alone together.

"I have been simply adoring you all the evening, my darling," whispered Wyvern passionately, as he released her from a good-night embrace.

She did not answer, but her eyes grew luminous, as she lifted her lips for a final kiss. A word of love from him was sufficient to make her simply lose herself. A pressure of two hands, and she was gone.

Chapter Eight.
The "Word in Private."

"I want to have a word with you in private, Wyvern."

"In private?"

"Yes. I was going to yesterday but left it till now. Business matters are best talked about in the morning."

Thus Le Sage, as the two met over their early coffee. Lalanté had not yet appeared.

"All right," assented Wyvern, who had a pretty straight inkling of what was coming. "Where shall we hold our council of war?"

"Out in the open. Nothing like the open veldt if you want to talk over anything important. If you do it in a room ten to one a word or two gets overheard, and a word or two is often quite enough to give away the whole show."

"There I entirely agree. Well – lead on."

Le Sage did so. Hardly a word was exchanged between the two as they walked for about half a mile, first along a bush path, then over the veldt. One was turning over in his mind how he should put the case to the other. The other, anticipating their bearing, had already made up his as to how he should meet the arguments advanced.

Le Sage came to a halt. They had reached the brink of a *krantz*, of no great height and railing away now in slabs, now in aloe-grown boulders, to the Kunaga River, the swirl and babble of whose turgid waters they could hear, as it coursed between its willow grown banks – could hear but not see, for a morning mist hung over the land, shutting out everything beyond a radius of twenty yards.

"We shall be all right here," said Le Sage, seating himself upon a stone. Then he relapsed into silence, and proceeded to fill his pipe. Wyvern did the same. Decidedly the situation was awkward. When two men who have been friends are about to embark on a discussion which the chances are fifty to one will leave them enemies – in short, is bound to culminate in a quarrel, and that a bitter one – why the preliminaries are sure to be awkward. Wyvern was the one to force the situation.

"Look here, Le Sage. We didn't come here to smoke the pipe of silent meditation, did we? You said something about business matters you wanted to talk over with me. Now – drive ahead."

"Yes. How are you getting on?"

The words came out jerkily.

"Wish I could answer 'Pretty well, thanks. How are you?'" said Wyvern with a rueful laugh. "I'm not getting on at all."

"No. And I don't suppose you ever will."

Wyvern stiffened. The other had never used that tone towards him before.

"That sounds nice, and friendly, and cheering," he answered coldly. "May I ask why you happen to hold that opinion?"

"Because you haven't got it in you," rapped out Le Sage. He was nettled at a certain spice of *hauteur* that the other had infused into his tone and manner. Moreover, he was nervous, and a commingling of nervousness and irritation is a very bad equipment indeed for the starting upon a difficult and delicate discussion. Wyvern, for his part, was the more sensitive to the bluntness of the statement, in that at the back of his mind lurked a misgiving that the speaker might be stating no more than the truth. Nothing he had ever touched had succeeded. He was no fool in the matter of intellect, but – somehow – he had never quite managed to "get there," and the consciousness of this was the secret canker of his life. He was disappointed, but not yet soured. In time he might come to be that.

"Are you quite sure of your ground in making that flattering statement?" he said, mustering great self-control – for this sort of talk was not at all what he was used to. Decidedly Le Sage was straining his privileges as father-in-law elect to a dangerous point.

"Well, I don't know. Only that events seem to bear it out most remarkably. Got rid of that mortgage on your place yet?"

"You know I haven't."

"Well, they were going to foreclose, weren't they? And if they do, it's tantamount to selling you up. Oh, I know. Of course, it would be no damn business of mine under ordinary circumstances. Under existing ones it is. I'm thinking of Lalanté."

"Great minds jump together then, for so am I. In fact, I'm thinking of her every day, every moment of my life."

"If you were to think a little more of her interests, then, it would be better all round. – For instance – I don't say it with any wish to be inhospitable, mind! – but by the time you get back you'll have been about twenty-fours hours away from home, and that quite unnecessarily. That's not the way to run a farm – and especially one like yours. I don't wonder your people get 'slaag-ing,' and all the rest of it."

This was not a fair hit, thought Wyvern to himself. A decided case of "below the belt." But he said nothing. He merely puffed away at his pipe, looking straight in front of him. The mist seemed lightening a little above the river.

"Well, then, if the worst comes to the worst, and you have to leave Seven Kloofs, what then? How will you stand? The sale of your stock won't amount to anything like a fortune I take it."

"No, but it'll amount to something. After that – I have an idea."

"An idea. Pho! That for an idea. One plan's worth all the 'ideas' in the world."

Le Sage, you see, had got into his element now. His nervousness had quite left him.

"Call it a plan then. And as to it I am hopeful. Why should a man's luck always be bad, Le Sage. Why the deuce shouldn't good times dawn for him? Ah! Look there."

Even as he spoke the mist, which had been lightening over the river, parted with a suddenness that was almost startling, and from a widening patch of vivid blue the newly risen sun poured down his life-giving beams. It was as an instantaneous transition from darkness to light – to bright, beautiful. Nature-awakening light – and with it the birds began to pipe and call with varying note from the surrounding bushes, while a troop of monkeys gambolling upon a sandspit down in the river-bed, were amusing themselves by leaping its channel, to and fro, as though in sheer gladness of heart. Further and further the mist rolled back, unfolding a dewy sparkle upon bush and veldt, a shroud as of myriad diamonds.

"Look – where?" queried Le Sage, shortly.

"Why, at how suddenly it became light, just as I was talking about my plan – and luck changing. I'm not superstitious, but I'll be hanged if I won't take that as an omen – and a good one."

Le Sage grunted, and shook his head in utter disgust.

"An omen?" he repeated. "Good Lord, Wyvern, what rot. Man, you'll never be anything but a dreamer, and you can't run a farm upon dreams – no nor anything else. Would you mind letting me into this 'plan' of yours?"

"At present I would. Later on, not now. And now, Le Sage, if you have quite done schoolmastering me, I move that we go back. In fact, I don't know that it was worth while our coming so far just to say all that."

"But you'll think so in a minute. It happens I haven't said all I came to say, and as it has to be said, I may as well say it at once and without beating around the bush. You must cease thinking of Lalanté at all. You must consider your engagement to her at an end."

Wyvern had felt nearly certain that some such statement constituted the real object of their talk, but now that it was made, it was none the less a blow. He felt himself growing a shade paler under the weather worn bronze of his face.

"What does Lalanté herself say about it," was his rejoinder.

"Say? Say?" echoed Le Sage, angrily. "She has no say in the matter. I simply forbid it."

"You can't do that, Le Sage. She is of full age, you know," said Wyvern quietly, but with a ring of sadness in his tone. "Look here – no, wait – hear me out," seeing that the other was about to interrupt with a furious rejoinder. "I've set myself out all through this interview never for a moment to lose sight of the fact that you are her father, consequently have sat quiet under a tone I would stand from no other man alive. But even the authority of a father has its limits, and you have started in to exercise yours a trifle too late."

"Then you refuse to give her up?" furiously.

"Most distinctly. Unless, that is, she herself wished it."

"Oh, you would then?" said Le Sage, quickly, clutching at a straw.

"Certainly. But I must hear it from her own lips, face to face. Not through a third party, or on paper." Le Sage's "straw" seemed to sink.

"I don't want to irritate you further, Le Sage," went on Wyvern after a moment's pause. "But I'm convinced as firmly as that you and I are sitting here that I shall never hear anything of the sort. It is not in Lalanté to turn from me in misfortune. Our love is too complete."

"And I don't count. I, her father, am to stand aside as of no account at all?"

The unconscious pathos that welled up in the very bitterness of his tone, reflected what had lain beneath his mind since some time back – that his child should be so ready and eager to leave him. And Wyvern's instinct was quick to grasp it.

"I quite see your import and sympathise," he said. "Yes, I sympathise, thoroughly. But Nature is nothing if not pitiless, and this is a provision of Nature. And look here, Le Sage, my existing run of ill-luck ought to be a recommendation from your point of view in that you will be able to keep the child longer with you, for of course I don't dream of claiming her until my luck changes."

"That'll be never then," rejoined the other, savagely. "Man, haven't you more sense of honour than to pin a girl to her contract when you know you haven't enough to keep yourself, let alone her? She is very young too. I don't know how I ever gave my consent."

"She has commonsense and capability far beyond her years, and you know it. Now see here, Le Sage. Be reasonable about this, and give me some sort of a show. If I bring off my plan satisfactorily, I shan't be the first man whose luck has turned."

"Oh, damn your 'plan' and your 'luck' too!" retorted the other, now completely losing his temper. "The first's a fraud and the other's fudge. Look here, if you weren't so much infernally bigger and stronger than me, I'd start in now to hammer you within an inch of your life, but as you are, it's of no use trying."

"No, it isn't," said Wyvern quietly, but not sneeringly.

Le Sage had got up and was pacing up and down feverishly. Wyvern had never moved. Had he known it, he was at that moment in some considerable peril. He was sitting right on the edge of the *krantz*, and the other was behind him; and Le Sage was one of those men who when they do fairly lose their tempers go nearly mad. Now his face was ghastly, and he snarled like a cornered animal.

"Your plan's a fraud," he repeated furiously, "and you're a fraud yourself. You humbugged me into believing you were a man of solid position, while all the time you were a damned, useless, bankrupt waster. You sneaked my consent under false pretences. Yes, under false pretences," he bellowed, "and now I withdraw it. D'you hear? I withdraw it unconditionally, you – swindler."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.