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Содержание

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Chapter One.
The Camp on the Matya'mhlope

"There! That is Umzilikazi's grave," said Christian Sybrandt, pointing out a towering pile of rocks some little way off, across the valley.

"Is it? Let's go and have a look at it then," was the prompt reply. But immediately upon having made it, the second speaker knew that he had spoken like a fool, for the first gave a short laugh.

"Go over and have a look at it?" he echoed. "Why we'd all be cut to bits before we got within half a mile. It's holy ground, man; guarded, picketed by armed *majara*, rigidly watched, day and night. You couldn't get near it, no, not at any price."

"Well, I've a great notion to try," persisted the other, to the imaginative side of whose temperament the place of sepulture of that remarkable savage, the remorseless, all-destroying war-leader, the founder and consolidator of a martial

nation, irresistibly appealed, no less than the mystery and peril enshrouding the undertaking did to the adventurous side. “No white man has ever seen it close, I think you said, Sybrandt?”

“That’s so. And you won’t constitute the exception, Blachland. You’ll never get there; and, if you did, you’d never get away.”

“Yet it would be interesting to constitute that exception,” persisted the other. “I like doing things that nobody else has done.”

“Well, even if you escaped the five hundred to one chances against you, you wouldn’t have the satisfaction of talking about it – not as long as you are in this country, at all events; for let even so much as a whisper get about that you had done such a thing, and your life wouldn’t be worth a week’s purchase.”

The two men were riding over the site of the old Mahlahlanhlela Kraal – distinguishable by its great circle of nearly overgrown hut floors, and sherds of rude pottery, erewhile the head-quarters of a favourite regiment of the Great King, whose tomb they were viewing. There it rose, that tomb, away on the right, a great pile standing boldly against the sky – prominent from the outermost edge of the rugged Matopo, all tumbled rocks, and granite boulders and scant tree growth; in front, an undulating sweep, bounded by the Inyoka ridge, the site of old Bulawayo. The two men were dressed in serviceable and well-worn buckskin, and carried rifles. Following a little distance behind them came a group of natives, whose burden, the meat and other spoils of a young sable antelope bull, testified to the

nature of the errand from which they were returning.

The countenance of both, darkened by sun and exposure, wore the same expression of blended repose and latent alertness which a roving up-country life seems invariably to produce. Sybrandt – he had dropped the original "Van" – was Dutch by birth, though English by sympathies and associations. Trader, hunter, gold-prospector, adventurer all round, his life had been spent mainly on the confines of civilisation, or far beyond the same; and what he did not know about natives, from the Zambesi to Durban, from Inhambane to Walfisch Bay, nobody else did. He, for his part, was no less known to them. "U' Klistiaan," as they called him, in adaptation of his baptismal name, stood to them as a white man who commanded their respect and confidence far and wide. Of cool courage and unflinching resolution, a firm friend, and, while enmity lasted, a determined and dangerous foe, he stood as high in the estimation of the Zulu-speaking races as these qualifications could place him, which is to say at the highest. He was a man of about forty; in outward aspect of medium height and of sturdy and powerful build, his dark hair and pointed beard just turning iron grey. His companion, whom we heard him address by the name of Blachland, was something of a mystery. Nobody knew much, if anything, about him, except that originally he was an English importation with some years of up-country experience, and that he came and went sporadically, disappearing for a time, and turning up again as if he had been away about a week, perfectly unexplanatory, uncommunicative,

as to his doings in the interim. He was a tall dark man, who might be any age compatible with a hardy frame and untiring energy. A keen sportsman and keener adventurer, he was ever on the look out for the possibilities underlying up-country life; and, in curious contrast to his normally hard and philosophic nature, was a tendency to fits of almost boyish excitement and recklessness; which would break out when least expected, and with apparently inadequate motive, and which were wont to land their owner in positions of peril or difficulty, but which, by a curious compensating element in nature, were none the less available to extricate him therefrom right at the critical moment.

Now he made no reply to his companion's very confident and more than ominous forecast. But more than one wistful glance did he send in the direction of the great natural mausoleum. The King's grave! This rock sepulchre would hold all that was weird and uncommon, and into it no European eye had ever gazed. That was sufficient for one of Hilary Blachland's temperament.

Soon the last resting-place of Umzilikazi, the Great King, was hidden from sight behind. A few miles more and a strange phenomenon as of a mighty cloud of dust and smoke, crowning a distant eminence, broke upon the view in front, and through it a vast cluster of round grass roofs, from the silent throne of the dead the pair had turned to front the throne of the living, pulsating with humanity and its primitive impulses – Bulawayo, the great kraal of Lo Bengula, son of that Umzilikazi whose bones lay within the sombre heart of that great rock pile behind.

Not on this, however, were their steps bent. Down in the valley a camp was set, and the white tents of three waggons rose among the scant bush on the banks of the Matya'mhlope, at the foot of the abrupt ridge of shining stones which gives to that insignificant river its name. And as our two wayfarers gained it the sun dropped, and in this latitude without twilight the night began to fall.

Two other white men were seated in camp as these two arrived. Like Christian Sybrandt, Young and Pemberton were traders and hunters, and looked it; whereas the presence of Hilary Blachland with the outfit was inconsequent. But that word more than rather summed up Hilary Blachland. He was all keenness, however, on anything new and strange, and now the impression had grown and grown upon him that Umzilikazi's grave came under both these qualifying adjectives.

Wherefore later, when the fire was roaring up brightly with red and cheery glow, and the sable antelope steaks, hot and fizzing, had been transferred from the frying-pan to the metal enamelled camp plates, he must needs drag in the subject again.

Pemberton, the elder of the other two traders, whistled and shook his heavy beard.

"It's a thing that won't bear meddling with," was his laconic dictum.

"Well, I should like to meddle with it to the extent of having a look at it anyway," persisted Blachland. "Any one here ever seen it close, by the way?"

"No, nor likely to," answered Young. "I saw it once, about a mile off; near enough to get a good look at it through a glass. It's a tall cleft, running right up the face of the boulder, and overhung by another boulder like a porch. There's a tree in front too. I'd just time to see so much when a lot of *majara*, spotting my binoculars, started for me, yelling like blazes. I judged it wise to take a bee-line for Bulawayo, and get under old Lo Ben's wing; but they ran me hard all the way – got there nearly as soon as I did, and clamoured to be allowed to kill me. Lo Ben wouldn't have that, but he hinted to me quietly that the country wouldn't be healthy for a year or so, and I took the hint. No, take my advice and leave it alone. Apart from the risk, there's no luck meddling with such places – no, none."

"Oh, skittles about luck. It's the risk I take count of, and that only. The fact is, Young, you old up-country men are as superstitious as sailors," returned Blachland, with that strange, eager restlessness which now and then, and generally unexpectedly, obtruded to give the lie to his ordinarily calm and immobile demeanour. "I'll risk the *majara*– luck doesn't count, – and sooner or later I'll explore Umzilikazi's grave."

Sybrandt was conscious of what, in a less self-contained man, would have been an obvious start at these words. A dark form had glided silently in among them all. It was only one of their camp servants, but – a native of the country. What if he had heard – had understood? He knew some English too!

"Even if you got through the pickets of *majara*, Blachland,"

struck in Sybrandt, when this man had retired; "you'd have another factor to reckon with. The King's Snake."

"Eh?"

"The King's Snake."

Blachland spluttered. "See here, Sybrandt," he said. "Are you seriously trying to fill me up? Me, mind? No, it can't be."

"Well, the Matabele say there's a big snake mounting guard over Umzilikazi's remains. It is the King's spirit which has passed into the snake. That is why the snake comes in such a lot when they go periodically and give the *sibonga* at his grave."

"And you believe that?"

"They say so."

"What sort of a snake is it?"

"A black *imamba*. Mind you, I've never seen it."

"Don't you be so cocksure about everything, Blachland," grunted Pemberton, who was fast dropping asleep. "Luck or no luck, there's mighty rum things happen you can't explain, nor scare up any sort of reason for."

"Won't do – no, not for half a minute," returned the other, briskly and decisively. "You can explain everything; and as for luck, and all that sort of thing – why, it's only fit for old women, and the lower orders."

Pemberton grunted again, and more sleepily still. His pipe at that moment fell out of his mouth, and he lurched over, fast asleep. Sybrandt, too, was nodding, but through his drowsiness he noticed that the native, a low-class Matabele, Hlangulu by name,

was moving about, as though trying to sidle up near enough to catch some of the conversation. He was drowsy, however, and soon dropped off.

Blachland, sitting there, felt anything but inclined for sleep. This new idea had caught on to his mind with a powerful hold. It was full of risk, and the object to be attained *nil*. The snake story he dismissed as sheer savage legend, childish and poor even as such. The luck theory, propounded by Pemberton, smacked of the turnip-fed lore of the average chaw-bacon in rural England. No, the risk lay in the picket-guard. That, to his mind, constituted the real peril, and the only one. It, however, might be avoided; and, the more he thought about it, the more resolved was Hilary Blachland to penetrate the forbidden recess, to explore the tomb of the warrior King, and that at any risk.

Strangely wakeful, he lounged there, filling and lighting pipe after pipe of good Magaliesberg. The stars gleamed forth from the dark vault, so bright and clear and lamp-like in the glow of night in those high, subtropical latitudes, that it seemed as though the hand had but to be stretched forth to grasp them. Away over the veldt, jackals yelped; and the glimmer of the camp fire, dying low, emboldened the hungry little beasts to come nearer and nearer, attracted by the fresh meat brought in during that afternoon. The native followers, their heads in their blankets, had ceased their sonorous hum of gossip, and were mingling their snores with the somewhat discomforting sounds emitted by the nostrils of Pemberton. Away on the northern sky-line, a faint

glow still hung, and from time to time a muffled snatch of far-away song. A dance of some sort was in late progress at the King's kraal, but such had no novelty for Blachland. The exploration of the King's grave, however, had; and he could think upon nothing else. Yet, could he have foreseen, his companions had uttered words of sound wisdom. He had better have left Umzilikazi's sepulchre severely alone.

Chapter Two.
Before the King

"Tumble out, Blachland. We've got to go up and interview the King." Thus Sybrandt at an early hour on the following morning. "And," he added in a low voice, "I hope the *indaba* will end satisfactorily, that's all."

"Why shouldn't it?" was the rather sleepy rejoinder. And the speaker kicked off his blanket, and, sitting up, yawned and stretched himself.

Three savage-looking Matabele were squatted on the ground just within the camp. They were *majara*, and were arrayed in full regimentals, i.e. fantastic bedizenments of cowhair and monkey-skin, and their heads crowned with the *isiqoba*, or ball of feathers; one long plume from the wing of a crested crane stuck into this, pointing aloft like a horn. The expression of their faces was that of truculent contempt, as their glance roamed scornfully from the camp servants, moving about their divers occupations, to the white men, to whom they were bearers of a peremptory summons. It was significant of the ominous character of the latter, no less than of the temper of arrogant hostility felt towards the whites by the younger men of the nation, that these sat there, toying with the blades of their assegais and battle-axes; for a remonstrance from Sybrandt against so gross a violation of

etiquette as to enter a friendly camp with weapons in their hands had been met by a curt refusal to disarm, on the ground that they were King's warriors, and, further, that they were of the King's bodyguard, and, as such, were armed, even in the presence of the Great Great One himself.

"I only hope no inkling of what we were talking about yesterday has got wind, Blachland," explained Sybrandt, seriously. "If Lo Ben got such a notion into his head – why then, good night. As to which, do you happen to notice that one of our fellows is missing? No, no; don't say his name. Those three jokers have got their ears wide open, and are smart at putting two and two together."

Thoroughly awake now, Blachland, looking around, became aware of the significance of the other's statement. One of the "boys" was missing, and that the one who had seemed to be overhearing when they had talked on that dangerous topic – Hlangulu, the Matabele.

"Hurry now, Amakiwa," growled one of the messengers. "Is not the Great Great One waiting?"

"He can wait a little longer, *umfane*," rejoined Pemberton, tranquilly sipping his coffee, which was hot.

"*Ah*! Who but a madman would provoke the wrath of the Black Bull?" growled the savage.

Pemberton nodded. "The Black Bull in this case is no longer a calf," he replied. "Therefore he will know that everything cannot be done in a hurry."

The three savages scowled and muttered. In their heart of hearts they had an immense respect for these cool, imperturbable white men, so entirely but unobtrusively fearless.

At last the latter arose, and, buckling on their bandoliers and taking their rifles, declared that they were ready.

"Put those down. The Great Great One has sent for you. You cannot go before him armed," said one of the envoys insolently, pointing with his knob stick. But for all the effect the injunction had upon those to whom it was addressed, it might just as well not have been uttered. The slightest possible raising of an eyebrow alone showed that they had so much as heard it. The horses were brought round saddled, and, mounting, they started, a kind of instinct moving them to outmanoeuvre each attempt of their truculent summoners to bring up the rear. But as they moved out of camp the idea was the same in all four minds – whether they were destined ever to re-enter it.

Lo Bengula was, at that time, friendly to the English. Sick of haggling with rival concession-mongers, he had finally concluded terms for the occupation of adjacent Mashunaland, and, having made the best of a bad job, felt relieved that his lines were henceforth cast in peaceful and pleasant places. But he reckoned without the nation which produced Drake and Hawkins, Raleigh and Clive, and – Cecil Rhodes.

He reckoned, also, without his own fighting men. The bumptiousness of these was inordinate, overwhelming. They were fully convinced they could whip all creation – that

agglomeration being represented hither to by the inferior tribes, which they had reduced and decimated ever since the exodus from Zululand. Now these troublesome whites were coming into the country by threes and fours – why not make an end of them before they became too numerous? Umzilikazi would have done this – Umzilikazi, that Elephant who had made the nation what it was. So they murmured against Lo Bengula, in so far as they dared, and that was a good deal, for the voice of a nation can make itself heard, even against a despot, when the potentate thinks fit to run counter to its sense.

Now, three out of the four knew the King intimately; the other, Blachland to wit, fairly well. They had frequently visited him at Bulawayo, either spontaneously, or in compliance with a request. But never had they been sent for in such fashion that a trio of armed and insolent youths were thought good enough to be the bearers of the King's message.

Upon this circumstance, and the disappearance of Hlangulu, Christian Sybrandt was expatiating, as they took their way leisurely along the slope where the business part of the present town of Bulawayo now stands, for Lo Bengula's great place crowned the rise some two miles to the eastward. And here signs of busy life were already apparent. Files of women, bearers of wood or water, were stepping along; bunches of cattle being driven or herded; here and there, men, in groups or singly, proceeding to, or returning from the great kraal, their deep-toned voices rising upon the air in contrast to the clearer trebles of the

feminine ones, though none the less rich and melodious.

And above the immense kraal, with its ring of clustering huts, a blue smoke cloud, drifting lazily to leeward, as though the place were in a state of conflagration. A peaceful, pastoral scene, but that the sun glinted on the blades of the assegais carried by the men, and on the sheen of their miniature shields.

Nor were other symptoms wanting, and those of a far more ominous character, which should bring home to our party the full fact that they were in the heart of a nation of turbulent and ruthless barbarians; for as they drew nearer to the great kraal, a mighty hubbub arose within its precincts, and there emerged from the stockade a dark surging crowd of armed warriors. These, uttering a ferocious shout, made straight for the new arrivals.

"Steady, Blachland," enjoined Sybrandt, in a low tone. "Don't lose your head, man; keep cool. It's the only thing to be done."

The warning was needed, for he to whom it was addressed had already shown signs of preparing to resist this hostile threatening demonstration. The gravity of the tone in which it was uttered, however, went far to neutralise in his mind the reassuring effect of the imperturbable aspect of his companions.

The swarm of savages came crowding round the four white men, brandishing their assegais and battle-axes, and frightening the horses not a little. But two Bechuana boys who were attendant upon their masters they managed to frighten a good deal more. These turned grey with terror, and really there was some excuse

for it.

For each had been seized by a tall ruffian, who, gripping him by the throat, was making believe to rip him with a great assegai brandished in front of the miserable wretch's face, every now and then letting him feel the point sufficiently to make him think the stroke already dealt, causing the victim to yell and whine with terror. The while his white masters could do nothing to protect him, their efforts being needed to calm and restrain their badly-frightened horses: an element of the grotesque which evoked roars of bass laughter from the boisterous and bloodthirsty crowd.

"Cease this fooling!" shouted Sybrandt, in the Sindabele tongue. "Is this how you treat the King's guests? Make way. We are bound upon the King's business."

"The King's business!" echoed the warriors. "The King's business! Ah! ah! We too are bound upon the King's business. Come and see, Amakiwa. Come and see how we black ones, the children of the King, the Eater-up of the Disobedient, perform his bidding."

Then, for the first time, our party became aware that in the midst of the crowd were two men who had been dragged along by raw-hide thongs noosed round their necks; and, their horses having quieted down, they were able to observe what was to follow. That the poor wretches were about to be sacrificed in some hideous and savage fashion was only too obvious, and they themselves could not refuse to witness this horror, for the reason

that to do so would be, in the present mood of these fiends, almost tantamount to throwing away their own lives.

"What is their offence, Sikala-kala?" asked Sybrandt, addressing a man he knew.

"Their offence? *Au*! it is great. They have gone too near the *Esibayaneni*, the sacred place where the King, the Great Great One, practises *mutt*. What offence can be greater than such?"

The victims, their countenances set and stony with fear, were now seized and held by many a pair of powerful and willing hands. Then, with the blade of a great assegai, their ears were deliberately shorn from their heads. A roar of delight went up from the barbarous spectators, who shouted lustily in praise of the King.

"So said the Great Great One: 'They had ears, but their ears heard what it was not lawful they should hear, so they must hear no more!' Is he not wise? *Au*! the wisdom of the calf of Matyobane!"

Again the executioners closed around their victims. A moment more and they parted. They were holding up to the crowd their victims' eyes. The roars of delight rose in redoubled volume.

"So said the Black One: 'They had eyes, but they saw what it was not lawful for them to look upon. So they must see no more!' *Au*! the greatness of the Elephant whose tread shaketh the world!"

There was a tigerish note in the utterance of this horrible paean which might well have made the white spectators shudder.

Whatever they felt, however, they must show nothing.

"I shall be deadly sick directly," muttered Blachland; and all wondered what horror was yet to come.

The two blinded and mutilated wretches were writhing and moaning, and begging piteously for the boon of death to end their terrible sufferings. But their fiendish tormentors were engaged in far too congenial a task to be in any undue hurry to end it. It is only fair to record that to the victims themselves it would have been equally congenial were the positions reversed. At last, however, the executioners again stepped forward.

"So said the Ruler of Nations," they bellowed, their short-handled heavy knob sticks held aloft: "These two had the power of thought. They used that power to pry into what it is not lawful for them even to think about. A man without brains cannot think. Let them therefore think no more."

And with these two last words of the King's sentence – terse, remorseless in the simplicity of its barbarous logic – the heavy knob sticks swept down with a horrid crunch as of the pulverising of bones. Another and another. The sufferings of the miserable wretches were over at last. Their death struggles had ceased, and they lay stark and motionless, their skulls literally battered to pieces.

Not the most hardened and philosophical of the white spectators could entirely conceal the expressions of loathing and repulsion which were stamped upon each countenance as they turned away from this horrid sight. On that of Blachland it was

far the most plainly marked, and seemed to afford the ferocious crowd the liveliest satisfaction.

"See there, Amakiwa," they shouted. "Look and behold. It is not well to pry into forbidden things. Behold the King's justice."

And again they chorused forth volleys of *sibonga*, i.e. the royal praises.

Was it merely a coincidence that their looks and the significance of the remark seemed to be directed peculiarly at Blachland? He himself was not the only one who thought so.

"What do you think now, Blachland?" said Young, dryly. "Better leave that little exploration scheme you were planning strictly alone, eh?"

"Well, I believe I had," was the answer.

And now the armed warriors clustered round the white men. Some were chatting with Christian Sybrandt as they moved upward to the great kraal, for they had insisted on forming a sort of escort for their visitors; or, as these far more resembled, their prisoners. They were in better humour now, after their late diversion, but still there were plenty who shook their assegais towards the latter, growling out threats.

And as they approached the vast enclosure, the same thought was foremost in the minds of all four. Something had gone wrong. They could only hope it was not as they suspected. They were absolutely at the mercy of a suspicious barbarian despot, the objects of the fanatical hate of his people. What that "mercy" might mean they had just had a grimly convincing object lesson.

Chapter Three.
What Happened at Bulawayo

As they entered the outer enclosure, a deep humming roar vibrated upon the air. Two regiments, fully armed, were squatted in a great crescent, facing the King's private quarters, and were beguiling the time with a very energetic war-song – while half a dozen warriors, at intervals of space apart, were indulging in the performance of *gwaza*, stabbing furiously in the air, right and left, bellowing forth their deeds of "dering-do" and pantomiming how they had done them – leaping high off the ground or spinning round on one leg. The while, the great crescent of dark bodies, and particoloured shields, and fantastic headgear, swaying to the rhythmic chant; the sparkle and gleam of assegais; the entirely savage note of anticipation conveyed by nearly two thousand excited voices, constituted a spectacle as imposing as it was indisputably awe-inspiring.

"The Imbizo and Induba regiments," said Sybrandt, with a glance at this martial array.

But with their appearance the song ceased, and the warriors composing this end of the crescent jumped up, and came crowding around, in much the same rowdy and threatening fashion which had distinguished the execution party down in the valley.

"Lay down your arms, Amakiwa!" they shouted. "*Au*! it is death to come armed within the gates of the Ruler of the World."

"It has never been death before – not for us," replied Sybrandt. "At the inner gate, yes – we disarm; not at the outer."

The answer only served to redouble the uproar. Assegais were flourished in the faces of the four white men – for they had already dismounted – accompanied by blood-curdling threats, in such wise as would surely have tried the nerves of any one less seasoned. The while Sybrandt had been looking round for some one in authority.

"Greeting, Sikombo," he cried, as his glance met that of a tall head-ringed man, who was strolling leisurely towards the racket. "These boys of thine are in high spirits," he added good-humouredly.

The crowd parted to make way for the new arrival, as in duty bound, for he was an induna of no small importance, and related to the King by marriage.

"I see you, Klistiaan," replied the other, extending his greeting to the rest of the party.

But even the presence of the induna could not restrain the turbulent aggressiveness of the warriors. They continued to clamour against the white men, whom they demanded should disarm here instead of at the inner gate.

To this demand, Sybrandt, who was tacitly allowed by the others to take the lead in all matters of native etiquette or diplomacy – did not deem it advisable to accede. But something

in Sikombo's face caused him to change his mind, and, having done so, the next best thing was to do it with a good grace.

"What does it matter?" he said genially. "A little way here, or a little way there." And he stood his rifle against the fence, an example which was followed by the others. The warriors then fell back, still with muttered threats; and, accompanied by the induna, the four white men crossed the open space to the gate of the King's stockade.

There perforce they had to wait, for the barbarian monarch of Zulu descent and tradition is, in practice, in no greater hurry to receive those who come to consult him than is the average doctor or lawyer of twentieth-century England, however eager he may be in his heart of hearts to do so, and the last of the Matabele kings was not the man to forget what was due to his exalted position.

"What does it all mean, Sybrandt?" said Blachland, as, sitting down upon the dusty ground, they lighted their pipes. "Why are the swine so infernally aggressive? What does it mean anyhow?"

"Mean?" returned Young, answering for Sybrandt, who was talking to the induna, Sikombo. "Why, it means that our people yonder will soon have to fight like blazes if they don't want their throats cut," – with a jerk of the hand in the direction of the newly occupied Mashunaland. "The *majara* are bound to force Lo Ben's hand – if they haven't already."

From all sides of the great kraal the ground sloped away in gentle declivity, and the situation commanded a wide and

pleasant view in the golden sunlight, and beneath the vivid blue of a cloudless subtropical sky. To the north and west the dark, rolling, bush-clad undulations beyond the Umguza River – eastward again, the plain, dotted with several small kraals, each contributing its blue smoke reek, led the eye on to the long flat-topped Intaba-'Zinduna. Down in the valley bottom – where now stands the huge straggling town, humming with life and commerce – vast cornfields, waving with plumed maize and the beer-yielding *amabele*; and away southward the shining rocky ridge of the Matya'mhlope; while, dappling the plain, far and near, thousands of multi-coloured cattle – the King's herds – completed the scene of pleasant and pastoral prosperity. In strange contrast to which the cloud of armed warriors, squatted within the gates, chanting their menacing and barbarous strophes.

Suddenly these were hushed, so suddenly indeed as to be almost startling. For other voices were raised, coming from the stockade which railed in the *esibayaneni*– the *sanctum sanctorum*. They were those of the royal "praisers" stentoriously shouting forth the king's *sibonga*: —

"He comes – the Lion!" – and they roared.

"Behold him – the Bull, the black calf of Matyobane!" – and at this they bellowed.

"He is the Eagle which preys upon the world!" – here they screamed; and as each imitative shout was taken up by the armed regiments, going through every conceivable form of animal voice

– the growling of leopards, the hissing of serpents, even to the sonorous croak of the bull-frog – the result was indescribably terrific and deafening. Then it ceased as suddenly as the war-song had ceased.

The King had appeared. Advancing a few steps from the gateway, he paused and stood surveying the gathering. Then, cleaving the silence in thunder tones, there volleyed forth from every throat the salute royal —

"Kumalo!"

Over the wide slopes without it rolled and echoed. Voices far and near – single voices, and voices in groups – the melodious voices of women at work in the cornfields – all who heard it echoed it back, now clear, now faint and mellowed by distance —

"*Kumalo*!"

There was that in the aspect of the King as he stood thus, his massive features stern and gloomy as he frowned down upon those whose homage he was receiving, his attitude haughty and majestic to the last degree, which was calculated to strike awe into the white beholders if only through the consciousness of how absolutely they were in his power. He had discarded all European attempts at adornment, and was clad in nothing but the inevitable *mútya* and a kaross made of the dressed skin of a lioness, thrown carelessly over his shoulders. His shaven head was surmounted just above the forehead by the small Matabele ring, a far less dignified-looking form of crest than the large Zulu one. Then, as he advanced a few steps further, with head thrown back, and

his form, though bulky, erect and commanding, a more majestic-looking savage it would be hard to imagine.

A massive chair, carved out of a single tree stump, was now set by one of the attendants, and as Lo Bengula enthroned himself upon it, again the mighty shouts of praise rent the air —

"Thou art the child of the sun!"
"Blanket, covering thy people!"
"King mountain of the Matopo!"
"Elephant whose tread shaketh the world!"
"Eater-up of Zwang'indaba!"
"Crocodile, who maketh our rivers to flow clear water!"
"Rhinoceros!"

Such, and many more, were the attributes wherewith they hailed their monarch, who was, to all intents and purposes, their god. Then the chorus altered. A new and more ominous clamour now expressed its burden. It became hostile and bloodthirsty in intent towards the white strangers within their gates.

Who were these whites? chanted the warriors. It were better to make an end of them. They were but the advance-guard of many more – swarms upon swarms of them – even as the few locusts who constituted the advance-guard of swarms upon swarms of that red locust, the devourer, which had not been known in the land before the Amakiwa had been allowed to come and settle in the land. The locusts had settled and were devouring everything – the Amakiwa had settled and were devouring everything. Let them be stamped out.

Those thus referred to sat still and said nothing. For all the effect the bloodthirsty howling had upon them outwardly, they might just as well not have heard it. Lo Bengula sat immovable in frowning abstraction. The two regiments, waxing more and more excited, began to close in nearer. As warriors armed for some service, they were allowed to approach that near the King, with their weapons and shields. They growled and mouthed around their white visitors, and one, at any rate, of these expected to feel the assegai through his back any moment.

But at this juncture one of the indunas seated near the King leaned forward, and spoke. He was a very old man, lean and tall, and, before the stoop of age had overtaken him must have been very tall indeed.

"Peace, children," he rebuked. "The dogs of the King have other game to hunt. These Amakiwa are not given to you to hunt. They are the friends of the Black Elephant."

Growls of dissatisfaction greeted this reproof, which seemed not supported by Lo Bengula.

"Have done, then," thundered the old induna. "Get back, dogs, who have but yesterday learned to yap. Offend ye the ears of the Great Great One with your yelpings? Get back!"

This time the rebuke answered. Respect for age and authority is among the Bantu races instinctive and immense, and the speaker in this instance represented both, for he had participated in the exodus from Zululand, under Umzilikazi, early in the century, and had been one of that potentate's most trusted

indunas before Lo Bengula was born; wherefore the malcontents shrunk back, with stifled growlings, to take up their former position at a distance.

Order being restored, Sybrandt judged it time to open the proceedings.

"Kumalo!" he began, saluting the King, his companions joining.

"I see you, Klistiaan," returned Lo Bengula, somewhat surlily. "All of you."

"The King has sent for us, and we have come," went on Sybrandt. "Strange messengers entered our camp this morning, three *majara*, armed. Furthermore, they were rude."

"*Au*!" exclaimed Lo Bengula, with a shake of the head. "See you not, Klistiaan, my fighting men love not white people just now. It would be better, indeed, if such were to leave the country. It is no longer the healthy season for white people here."

Which apparently commonplace remark conveyed to these experienced listeners, three distinct meanings – first, that their position was exceedingly dangerous; secondly, that Lo Bengula was aware that even his authority might be insufficient to protect them from the fanatical hate of his warriors, but did not choose to say so in so many words; and lastly, the tone in which it was uttered conveyed a royal command. But to the recipients of the latter, it was exceedingly distasteful. An order of a more startling nature was, however, to follow.

"You, Isipau," addressing Blachland. "Turn your waggon

wheels homeward, before the going down of the sun."

"Isipau," signifying "mushroom," was Blachland's native name, and as such he had been known among the natives on his first arrival in the country, years before, owing to his inordinate partiality for that delectable vegetable wherever it could be obtained.

"When white people come into my country I welcome them as my friends," went on the King. "When I give them leave to hunt and to trade, it is well. It is not well when they seek to look into things for which I have given them no permission. Now I have given an order, and I give not my orders twice. Fare ye well. *Hambani-gahle*."

And without another word, Lo Bengula rose from his seat, and stalked within the stockade.

Blachland was the first to speak. "Damn!" he ejaculated.

"Be careful, man, for Heaven's sake," warned Sybrandt. "If they got wind you were cursing the King, then – good-night!" Then, turning to the old induna, who had quelled the outcry against them, "Who has poisoned the heart of the Great Great One against us, Faku? Have we not always been his friends, and even now we have done no wrong."

The old induna shrugged his shoulders, as he answered —

"Who am I that I should pry into the King's mind, Klistiaan? But his 'word' has been spoken in no uncertain voice," he added significantly.

This there was no denying, and they took their leave. As they

passed out of the kraal, the lines of warriors glowered at them like wolves, for though the conversation had been inaudible to them, they divined that these whites had incurred the King's displeasure.

"You've got us into a pretty kettle of fish, Blachland," said Young, rather curtly, as they rode in the direction of their camp.

"Don't see it," was the reply. "Now, my belief is, Lo Ben is shirty about our gold-prospecting. My scheme had nothing to do with it."

"Blachland's right, Young," cut in Pemberton. "If it had been the other thing, we wouldn't have got off so cheaply. Eh, Sybrandt?"

"Rather not. We may thank our stars it wasn't the other. That rip Hlangulu must have been strung upon us as a spy. The old man is dead off any gold-prospecting. Afraid it'll bring a swarm of whites into the country, and he's right. Why, what's this?"

All looked back, and the same idea was in the mind of each. Had Lo Bengula thought better of it, and yielded to the bloodthirsty clamour of his warriors? For the gates of Bulawayo were pouring forth a dense black swarm, which could be none other than the impi gathered there at the time of their visit, – and this, clear of the entrance, was advancing at a run, heading straight for the four equestrians.

These looked somewhat anxious. Their servants, the two Bechuana boys, went grey with fear.

"Is it a case of leg-bail?" said Blachland, surveying the on-

coming horde.

"No, we must face it anyhow," answered Pemberton, puffing at his pipe tranquilly. "Besides, we can't leave these poor devils of boys to be murdered. Eh, Sybrandt?"

"Never run away, except in a losing fight and there's no help for it," was the reply.

Accordingly they kept their horses at a walk. But the moment was a thrilling one. On swept the impi; but now it had drawn up into a walk, and from its ranks arose a song —

> "Uti mayihlome, mayihlome katese njebo!
> Ise nompako wayo namanyatelo ayo!
> Utaho njalo. Uti mayihlome katese njebo!"

This strophe – which may be rendered roughly to mean, "He says (i.e. the King), 'Let it (the impi) arm. Let it arm at once. Come with its food, with its sandals.' He says always. He says, 'Let it arm at once!'" – was boomed forth from nearly two thousand throats, deafening, terrifying. But the impi swept by, and, passing within a hundred yards, singing in mighty volume its imposing war-song, shields waving, and assegais brandished menacingly towards the white men, it poured up the opposite slope, taking a straight line, significantly symbolical of the unswerving purpose it had been sent to fulfil.

An involuntary feeling of relief was upon the party, upon all but one, that is. For Hilary Blachland, noting the direction taken by this army of destroyers, could not but admit a qualm of very real and soul-stirring misgiving. That he had good grounds for

the same we shall see anon.

Chapter Four.
Hermia

"I don't care. I'll say it again. It's a beastly shame him leaving you alone like this."

"But you are not to say it again, or to say it at all. Remember of whom you are speaking."

"Oh, no fear of my forgetting that – of being able to forget it. All the same, he ought to be ashamed of himself."

And the speaker tapped his foot impatiently upon the virgin soil of Mashunaland, looking very hot, and very tall, and very handsome. The remonstrant, however, received the repetition of the offence in silence, but for a half inaudible sigh, which might or might not have been meant to convey that she was not nearly so angry with the other as her words seemed to imply or their occasion to demand. Then there was silence.

An oblong house, of the type known as "wattle and daub," with high-pitched thatch roof, partitioned within so as to form three rooms – a house rough and ready in construction and aspect, but far more comfortable than appearances seemed to warrant. Half a dozen circular huts with conical roofs, clustered around, serving the purpose of kitchen and storehouse and quarters for native servants; beyond these, again, a smaller oblong structure, constituting a stable, the whole walled round by a

stockade of mopani poles; – and there you have a far more imposing establishment than that usually affected by the pioneer settler. Around, the country is undulating and open, save for a not very thick growth of mimosa; but on one hand a series of great granite kopjes rise abruptly from the plain, the gigantic boulders piled one upon the other in the fantastic and arbitrary fashion which forms such a characteristic feature in the landscape of a large portion of Rhodesia.

"Well?"

The woman was the first to break the silence – equally a characteristic feature, a cynic might declare.

"Well?"

The answer was staccato, and not a little pettish. The first speaker smiled softly to herself. She revelled in her power, and was positively enjoying the cat and mouse game, though it might have been thought that long custom would have rendered even that insidious pastime stale and insipid.

"So sorry you have to go," she murmured sweetly. "But it's getting late, and you'll hardly reach home before dark."

The start – the blank look which overspread his features – all this, too, she thoroughly enjoyed.

"Have to go," he echoed. "Oh, well – yes, of course, if you want to get rid of me – "

"I generally do want to get rid of people when they are sulky, and disagreeable, and ill-tempered," was the tranquil reply. But the expression of her eyes, raised full to his, was such as to take

all the sting out of her words.

Not quite all, however, for his mind was in that parlous state best defined as "worked up" – and the working-up process had been one, not of hours or of days, but of weeks.

"Well, then, good-bye." Then, pausing: "Why do you torment me like this, Hermia, when you know – "

"What's that? I didn't say you might call me by my name."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mrs Blachland," was the reply, bitterly, resentfully emphatic. Then, thawing suddenly, "You didn't mind it the other day, and – well, you know what you are to me and always will be."

"Until somebody else is more so," came the smiling interruption. "Hark" – raising a hand suddenly, and listening intently. "Yes, it is. Will you be a very dear boy, Justin, and do something for me?"

"You know I would do anything for you – anything in the wide world."

"Oh, this is nothing very great. There are guinea-fowl over there in the kopje – I can hear them. I only want you to take Hilary's gun, and go and shoot me a few. Will you? The supplies are running low."

"Of course I will," was the answer, as they both went inside, and Justin Spence, invested with an excellent Number 12 bore, and a belt full of cartridges, started off on his errand of purveyor to the household, all his ill-humour gone. He was very young, you see, and the next best thing to glowing in the presence of his

charmer was to be engaged in rendering her some service.

She stood there watching his receding form, as it moved away rapidly over the veldt in long elastic strides. Once he turned to look back. She waved her hand in encouragement.

"How good-looking he is!" she said to herself. "How well he moves too – so well set up and graceful! But why was he so emphatic just now when he called me that? Was it accidental? I wonder was it? Oh yes, it must have been. That's the worst of an *arrière pensée*, one is always imagining things. No, the very fact of his putting such emphasis upon the name shows it was accidental. He'd never have been so mean – Justin isn't that sort."

She stood for a little longer, shading her eyes to gaze after him, again smiling softly to herself as she reflected how easily she could turn him round her little finger, how completely and entirely he was her slave; and, indeed, Justin Spence was not the only one of whom this held good. There was a warm-blooded physical attractiveness about her which never failed to appeal to those of the other sex. She was not beautiful, hardly even pretty. Her dark hair was plentiful, but it was coarse and wavy, and she had no regularity of feature, but lovely eyes and a very fascinating smile. Her hands were large, but her figure, of medium height, was built on seductive lines; and yet this strange conglomeration of attractions and defects was wont to draw the male animal a hundredfold more readily than the most approved and faultless types of beauty could ever have done.

Still musing she entered the house. It was cool within. Strips

of "limbo," white and dark blue, concealed the wattle and thatch, giving the interior something of the aspect of a marquee. There were framed prints upon the walls, mostly of a sporting character, and a few framed photographs. Before one of these she paused.

"I think you are tired of me, Hilary," she murmured, as though addressing the inanimate bit of cardboard. "I think we are tired of each other. Yet – are we?"

Was there a touch of wistfulness in the words, in the tone as she gazed? Perhaps.

The eyes which met hers from the pictured cardboard were the eyes which had been all powerful to sway her, body and soul, as no other glance had ever availed to do; the face was that which had filled her every thought, day and night, and as no other had ever held it. Ah, but that was long ago: and time, and possession, utterly without restriction, had palled the heretofore only dreamed-of bliss!

"Yes, I think we are tired of each other," she pursued. "He never takes me anywhere with him now. Says a camp's no place for me, with nothing but men in it. As if I'd go if there were other women. Pah! I hate women. He used not to say that. Ah, well! And Justin! he really is a dear boy. I believe I am getting to love him, and when he comes back I shall give him a – Well, wait till he does. Perhaps by then I shall have changed my mood."

She had dropped into a roomy rocking-chair – a sensuous, alluring personality as she lay back, her full supple figure swaying to the rhythmic movement of the rocker, kept going by one foot.

"It is as Justin said," pursued the train of her meditations, "an abominable shame – a beastly shame, he called it – that I should be left all alone like this. Well, if I am, surely no one can blame me for consoling myself. But what a number of them there have been, all mad, quite mad, for the time, though not all so mad as poor Reggie. No, I oughtn't to be proud of that – still I suppose I am. It isn't every woman can say that a man has blown his brains out for her – and such a man as that too – a man of power and distinction, and wealthy enough even for me. If it hadn't been for Hilary, he needn't have done it. And, now Hilary and I are tired of each other. Ah!"

The last aloud. She rose and went to the door. The sound of a distant shot, then another, had given rise to this diversion. It came from away behind the granite kopjes. Her deputed hunter had got to work at any rate, with what result time would show.

The afternoon sun was declining. His rays swept warm and golden upon the spreading veldt and the pioneer residence, the latter looking, within its stockade, like a miniature fort. The air was wonderfully clear and pure; the golden effulgence upon the warm and balmy stillness rendering life well-nigh a joy in itself. The distant mellow shouts of the native herders, bringing in the cows; the thud of the hoofs of knee-haltered horses, nearer home, driven into their nightly stabling – for lions were prone to sporadic visits, and nothing alive could with safely be left outside; and then, again and again from time to time, the distant crack of the gun away behind the great granite kopjes, – all seemed much

nearer by reason of the sweet unearthly stillness.

"He is doing me real service," said Hermia to herself, as she gazed forth over this, and as each far-away report of the double-barrel was borne to her through the sweet evening air. "I think I can see him, sparing no pains – no trouble – climbing those horrid rocks, blown, breathless, simply because I —*I*– have asked him to do so."

The sensuous glow of the rich African evening seemed to infect her. She stood, the sunlight bathing her splendid form, in its easy but still well-fitting covering. She began to wrap herself in anticipation, even as the glow of the declining day was wrapping her in its wondrous, ever-changing light. He would be back soon, this man whom she had sent out to toil through the afternoon heat in obedience to her behest. What would he not do if she so ordained it? And yet, as a saving clause, there was ever present to her mind the certainty that in any great and crucial matter his will would come uppermost, and it would be she who should have to receive instructions and follow them implicitly.

But then, if no great or crucial matter ever arose, her regard for him, so far from growing would, in time, diminish. He was younger than she was; his knowledge of the world – let alone his experience of life – immeasurably inferior to hers. Why, even his whole-souled and entire devotion to herself was the outcome of a certain callowness, the adoration of a boy. But to her omnivorous appetite for adoration it counted for something at any time, and here, where the article was scarce, why, like

everything else in that remote corner of the earth, its value stood vastly enhanced. Yet even she could not in candour persuade herself that it contained the element of durability.

And that other? Well, he was tired of her – and she was just a little tired of him. Yet she had at one time pictured to herself, and to him, that life, alone with him, such as she was now leading, would be simple and unalloyed Paradise – they two, the world apart. She had looked up to him as to a god: now she wondered how she could ever have done so; there were times, indeed, when she was not careful to avoid saying as much. He had never replied, but there was that in his look which had told her plainer than words that she was fast driving nail after nail into the coffin of their love. His absences had grown more frequent and more prolonged. When at home he was graver, less communicative, never confidential.

And yet – and yet? Could that past ever be slurred over? Had it not left too deep, too indelible a mark on her, on both of them for that? This was a side, however, upon which Hermia never dwelt. Though physically seductive beyond the average, she was lacking in imagination. This kept her from looking forward, still more from such unprofitable mental exercise as retrospect. In sum, she was little more than a mere animal, enjoying the sunniness of life, cowering and whimpering when its shadow came. Just now, sunshine was uppermost, and her strong, full-blooded temperament expanded and glowed with pulsating and generous life.

Her meditations were broken in upon, and that by the sound of distant whistling, rapidly drawing nearer. Somehow the strains of "A bicycle made for two," and "Ta-ra-ra boomdeay," seemed to frame a jarring harmony to the sweet sunset beauty of that green and golden sweep of surrounding – the feathery mimosa and the tropical mahobo-hobo tree, and the grey granite piles, yonder, against the purple and red of the western sky – but the shrill whoop and dark forms of the Mashuna boys bringing in the cattle fitted in with the picture. But no eye or ear had she for any such incongruities, any such contrast. Justin Spence was drawing nearer and nearer to the house, with rapid impatient strides, and she could see that he was not returning empty-handed either.

Assuming her most seductive manner and most bewitching smile, she strolled down to the gate to welcome him.

Chapter Five.
The Net Spread

"Look at this – and this. Five altogether, and I only had six chances. Not bad, is it? They were beastly wild, you know, and I had to scramble all over that second kopje after them."

He flung down two substantial feathered bunches, representing *in toto* the guinea-fowl just enumerated.

"You are a dear good boy, Justin," replied Hermia, looking down at the spoils which he had literally laid at her feet, and then up into his eyes. They were clear and blue, the clearer for the healthy brown of the face. How handsome he was, she thought, glancing with a thrill of approval at the tall well set-up form, in all the glory of youth and the full vigour of health. "You are really very reliable – and – you need not go yet. Come in now, and well put away the gun, and you shall stay and have some supper with me; for really I am awfully lonely. Unless, of course, you are afraid of going to your camp so late. They say lion spoor has been seen again."

"If it had been the devil's spoor it would matter about as much or as little," he replied, with huge and delighted contempt.

"Sh! Don't talk about unpleasant subjects – or people," she retorted. "It isn't lucky."

They had entered the house. After the glow of light without,

it seemed almost dark, and the sun had just gone off the world, leaving the brief pretence of an African twilight. An arm stole around her, imprisoning her tightly.

"I want my reward for having carried out your instructions so efficiently," said the young man. "Now give it me."

"Reward! Virtue is its own reward, you silly boy," answered Hermia, glancing up into his eyes, with her mocking ones. "In this case, it will have to be."

"Will it indeed?" he retorted shortly; and, stirred by the maddening proximity, likewise encouraged by a certain insidious yielding of her form within the enforced embrace, he dropped his lips on hers, and kissed them full, passionately, again and again.

"There, that will do," she gasped, striving to restrain the thrill that ran through her frame. "I didn't say you might do that. Really, Justin, I shall have to forbid you the house. Let me go, do you hear?"

"Hear? Yes, but I don't intend to obey. Oh – damn!"

The last remark was addressed at large as he changed his mind with marvellous alacrity, and, wheeling round, was endeavouring to hang the bandolier to the wall upon a pin that would hardly have held a Christmas card, as though his life depended upon it. For there had suddenly entered behind them one of the small Mashuna boys who did the house and other work – had entered silently withal, the sooty little rascal; and now his goggle eyes were starting from their sockets with curiosity as he went about doing whatever he had to do, sending furtive and interested

glances at these two, whom he had surprised in such unwonted proximity.

"See, now, where your impulsiveness comes in," said Hermia, when the interrupter had gone out.

"Is that the name of that small black nigger?" said Justin Spence, innocently. "I always thought he was yours."

"Don't be foolish, dear. It's a serious matter."

"Pooh! Only a small black nigger. A thing that isn't more than half human."

"Even a small black nigger owns a tongue, and is quite human enough to know how to wag it," she reminded him.

"I'll cut it out for the young dog if he does," was the ferocious rejoinder.

"Excellent, as a figure of speech, my dear Justin. Only, unfortunately, in real life, even in Mashunaland, it can't be done."

"Well, shall I give him a scare over it?"

"You can't, Justin. In the first place, you could hardly make him understand. In the second, even if you could, you would probably make matters worse. Leave it alone."

"Oh, it was on your account. It was of you I was thinking."

"Then you don't mind on your own?"

"Not a hang."

She glanced at him in silent approval. This straight, erect fearlessness – this readiness to defy the whole world for her sake appealed to her. She was of the mind of those women of other times and peoples – the possession of whom depended on the

possessor's ability to take and keep.

"Well, I must leave you now for a little while," she said. "Those two pickannins are only of any use when I am looking after them. They haven't even learnt to lay a table."

"Let me help you."

"No. Candidly, I don't want you. Be a good boy, Justin, and sit still and rest after your walk. Oh, by the way – " And unlocking a cupboard, she produced a bottle of whisky. "I was very forgetful. You'll like something to drink after the said walk?"

"No, thanks. Really I don't."

"You don't? No wonder you've done no good prospecting. A prospector who refuses a drink after a hot afternoon's exertion! Why, you haven't learnt the rudiments of your craft yet. But you must want one, and so I'll fix it up for you. There, say when – is that right?" she went on brightly, holding out the glass. "Yes, I know what you are going to say – of course it is, if I mixed it. You ought to be ashamed to utter such a threadbare banality."

He took the glass from her hand, but set it down untasted. The magnetism of her eyes had drawn him. It seemed to madden him, to sap his very reason, to stir every fibre in his body.

"No," she said decidedly, deftly eluding the clasp in which he would fain have imprisoned her again, and extending a warning hand. "No, not again, – so soon," she added mentally. "Remember, I have not forgiven you for that outrageous piece of impertinence, and don't know that I shall either. I am wondering how you could have dared."

If ever there was a past mistress in the art of fooling the other sex, assuredly Hermia Blachland might lay claim to that distinction. Standing there in the doorway, flashing back a bright, half-teasing, half-caressing look, which utterly belied the seeming sternness of her words, the effect she produced was such as to turn him *instanter* into a most complete fool, because her thorough and subservient slave. Then she went out.

We have said that one of the large circular huts within the enclosure served the purpose of a kitchen, and hither she proceeded with the exceedingly useful and unromantic object of getting supper ready. Yet, standing there in the midst of stuffy and uninviting surroundings, as she supervised the Mashuna boys and the frying of the antelope steaks, even that prosaic occupation was not entirely devoid of romance to-night; for somehow she found herself discharging it extra carefully, for was it not for him?

"Now, Tickey, keep those goggle eyes of yours on what you're doing, instead of rolling them around on everything and everybody else," she warned, apostrophising the small boy whose entrance had been so inopportune a short time ago.

"Yes, missis," replied the urchin, his round face splitting into a stripe of dazzling white as he grinned from ear to ear, whether at the recollection of what he had recently beheld, or out of sheer unthinking light-heartedness. Then he turned and made some remark in their own language to his companion, which caused that sooty imp to grin and chuckle too.

"What's that you're grinning at, you little scamp?" said Hermia, sharply, with a meaning glance at a thin sjambok which hung on the wall, a cut or two from which was now and again necessary to keep these diminutive servitors up to the mark.

"No be angry, missis. Tickey, he say, 'Missis, she awful damn pretty.'"

Hermia choked down a well-nigh uncontrollable explosion of laughter.

"You mustn't use that word, Primrose," she said, trying to look stern. "It's a bad word."

"Bad word? How that, missis? Baas, he say it. Baas in dere – Baas Sepence," was the somewhat perplexing rejoinder.

"Well, it's a white man's word; not a word for children, black or white," explained Hermia, lamely.

The imps chuckled. "I no say it, missis," pursued Primrose. "Tickey, he say missis awful beastly pretty. Always want to look at her. Work no well done, missis' fault. Dat what Tickey say. Always want look at missis."

"You'd better look at what you're doing now, you monkey, and do it properly too, or you know what's likely to happen," rejoined Hermia. But the implied threat in this case was absolutely an empty one, and the sooty scamps knew it. They knew, too, how to get on the soft side of their mistress.

That, however, was the side very much to the fore this evening. Throughout her prosaic occupation, her mind would recur with a thrill to that scene of a short half-hour ago, and already she

longed for its repetition. But she was not going to give him too much. She must tantalise him sufficiently, must keep him on tenterhooks, not make herself too cheap. But was she not tantalising herself too? Certainly she was, but therein lay the zest, the excitement which lent keenness to the sport.

They sat down to table together. The door stood open on account of the heat, and, every now and then, winged insects, attracted by the light, would come whizzing round the lamp. There was a soft, home-like look about the room, a kind of pervading presence, and Justin Spence, basking in that presence, felt intoxicatingly happy. He could hardly keep his eyes from her as she sat at the head of the modest table, and the artificial light, somewhat shaded, toned down any defects of feature or colouring, and enhanced twenty-fold the expression and animation which with her physical contour, constituted the insidious and undefinable attraction which was her greatest charm. Looking at these two it was hard to believe they were the inmates of a rough pioneer hut in the far wilds of Mashunaland, but for the attire of one of them; for a white silk shirt, rather open at the throat, guiltless of coat or waistcoat, a leathern belt and riding breeches hardly constitutes evening dress in more civilised countries.

He was telling her about himself, his position and prospects, to all of which she was listening keenly, especially as regards the latter, yet without seeming to. She knew, none better, how to lead him on to talk, always without seeming to, and now, to-

night, she was simply turning him inside out. He had prospects and good solid ones. He had only come out here partly from love of adventure, partly because, after all, prospects are only prospects; and he wanted to make a fortune – a quick and dazzling fortune by gold-digging. So far, he had been no nearer making it than most others out there on the same tack, in that, for all the gold he had struck, he might as well have sunk a shaft on Hampstead Heath. Still, there was no knowing, and all the exciting possibilities were there to spur him on.

Afterwards they sat outside. The night, though warm and balmy, was not oppressive. And it was very still. The screech of the tree frog, the distant yelp of a jackal, the deeper howl of a hyena, broke in upon it from time to time, and the rhythmic drone of voices from the servants' quarters. This soon ceased and the world seemed given over to night – and these two.

"How will you find your way back?" Hermia was saying. "You'll get lost."

"That's quite likely. So I'm not going to try. You'll have to give me a shakedown here."

"No. Justin, dear, believe me it would be much better not. You must even risk the chance of getting lost."

"What if I'm afraid? Suppose one of those lions they've been talking about got hold of me? It would be your doing."

Hermia smiled to herself. The excuse was too transparent. He afraid! The gleam of her white teeth in the darkness betrayed her.

"It's no laughing matter," he said. "Listen, darling, you don't

really want to get rid of me?"

"It would be better if you were to go, dearest," she answered, slipping her hand into his. "Believe me, it would."

The softness of her voice, the thrill of her touch simply intoxicated him with ecstasy, and there was an unsteadiness in his tone as he answered —

"Surely in the wilds of Mashunaland we can chuck conventionalities to the winds. If it was any one else who asked you for a shakedown you wouldn't turn him out. Why me, then?"

"Because it is you, don't you see?" was the reply, breathed low and soft, as the pressure of her fingers tightened.

They could hear each other's heart-beats in the still dead silence – could see the light of each other's eyes in the gleam of the myriad stars. The trailing streak of a meteor shot across the dark, velvety vault, showing in its momentary gleam to each the face of the other. Suddenly Hermia started violently.

"Hark! what is that?" she cried, springing to her feet.

For a loud harsh shout had cleft the stillness of the night. It was followed by another and another. Coming as it did upon the dead silence, the interruption was, to say the least, startling: all the more so to these two, their nerves in a state of high-strung tension.

"Nothing very alarming," returned Spence. "You must have heard it before. Only a troop of baboons kicking up a row in the kopjes."

"Of course; but somehow it sounded so loud and so near."

It was destined to do so still more. For even as she spoke there arose a most indescribable tumult – shrieks and yells and chattering, and over all that harsh, resounding bark: and it came from the granite kopje nearest the house – where Spence had found the troop of guinea-fowl that afternoon.

"What a row they're making!" he went on. "Hallo! By Jove! D'you hear that?"

For over and above the simian clamour, another sound was discernible – a sound of unmistakable import. No one need go to Mashunaland to hear it, nor anything like as far. A stroll across Regent's Park towards feeding time at the Zoo will do just as well. It was the deep, throaty, ravening roar of hungry lions.

"Phew! that accounts for all the shindy!" said Justin. "Now do you want me to go, Hermia? There isn't much show for one against a lion in the dark, and, judging from the racket, there must be several. Well, shall I start?"

She had drawn closer to him instinctively; not that there was any danger, for the stockade was high and strong – in fact, had been erected with an eye to such emergency. Now they were strained together in a close embrace, this time she returning his kisses with more than his own passion.

"You are mine – mine at last, my heart, my life!" he whispered. And the answer came back, merely breathed —

"Yes, I am. All yours."

And above, the myriad eyes of the starry heavens looked down; and without, the horrible throaty growl of the ravening

beasts rent the night.

Chapter Six.
After-Thoughts

If ever any man was in the state colloquially defined as over head and ears in love, and if ever any man had practical demonstration that his love was returned abundantly by the object thereof, assuredly the name of that man was Justin Spence. Yet when the sun rose upon him on the following morning he somehow did not feel as elate as he should have done.

For, whatever poetic associations may cluster around the hour of sunset, around that of sunrise there are none at all. It is an abominably matter-of-fact and prosaic hour, an hour when the average human is wont to feel cheap if ever, prone to retrospect, and, for choice, retrospect of an unwelcome nature. All that he has ever done that is injudicious or mean or *gauche* will infallibly strike him as more injudicious and meaner and more *gauche* in the cold and judicial stare of the waking hour. To this rule Justin Spence was no exception. His passion had not cooled – no, not one whit; yet he awoke feeling mean. His conduct had been weak – the development thereof shady: in short, in the words of his own definition, "it was not playing the game."

The worst of it was that he was indebted to Blachland for more than one good turn, and now, what had been his requital for such? The other was his friend, and trusted him – and now, he had taken

advantage of that friend's absence. In the unsparing light of early morning the thing had an ugly look – yes, very.

As against that, however, other considerations would arise to set themselves. First of all, he himself was human, and human powers had their limits. Then, again, the other did not in the least appreciate this splendid gift, this matchless treasure which had fallen to his lot: otherwise, how could he leave her all alone as he did, absent himself for days, for weeks at a time? He had not always done so, Justin had gathered; and from Hermia's reminiscences of camp life she seemed to have enjoyed it. If he, Justin, had been in Blachland's place, not for a single day should she have been away from him. But then, Justin was very young, and all the circumstances and surroundings went to make him think that way.

He had known these people for some months, but *of* them he knew nothing. The hard, reticent, self-reliant up-country trader was not the man to make a confidant of one whom he regarded as a mere callow youth. But he had been very kind to Justin, and had held out a helping hand to him on more than one occasion. Hermia, for her part, had merely noted that the young man was very handsome and well set up, and that in about a week he was desperately in love with herself. There were two or three others of whom the latter held good, even in that remote region, but they awakened no reciprocal feeling in her. She would keep them dangling simply as a mere matter of habit; but Justin Spence had touched a responsive chord within her. It was one of a

sheerly physical nature, but she had more and more grown to look forward to his visits, and we must admit that she had not long to look.

The more he thought it over the less he liked it. He could not even lay the spurious balm to his soul that "every man for himself" was the maxim which justified everything – that the glorious fascinations of this woman went wholly unappreciated by the man who should have been the one of all others to prize them, and therefore were reserved and destined for another, and that himself. This sort of reasoning somehow would not do. It struck him as desperately thin in the cool judicial hour of waking. He had behaved shabbily towards Blachland, and, the worst of it was, he knew he should go on doing so. And as though to confirm him in that conviction, at that moment the voice of the siren, clear but soft, was borne to his ears.

What had become of all his misgivings now, as he sprang out of bed, his one and only thought that of joining her as soon as possible? The voice, however, was not addressed to him. It was merely raised in commonplace command to the small Mashuna boys. What a lovely voice it was! he thought to himself, pausing to listen, lest the splashing of his tub should cause him to lose a tone of it: and he was right so far. Hermia owned a beautiful speaking voice, and it constituted not the least of her fascinations. Recklessly now Justin cast his self-accusations to the winds.

And Hermia? Well, she had none to cast. Self-accusation was a phase of introspect in which she never indulged. Why

should she, when the rule of conduct on which she acted with a scrupulosity of observance worthy of a better cause, was "Get all you can out of life, and while you can"? Never a thought had she to waste on the absent. It was his fault that he was absent. Never, moreover, a misgiving.

Yet when Spence joined her there in the gateway of the stockade, the eager, happy glow in his face met with scant response in her own. She affected a reproachful tone and attitude. They had both done very wrong, it conveyed. It could not be helped now, but the least said, soonest mended. They had been very weak, and very foolish, but it must never occur again. And all the while she was killing herself in her efforts to restrain her laughter, for she fully intended that it should occur again – again and again – and that at no distant period: but she was going to keep her adorer's appreciation up to fever heat. To this intent, he must be kept well in hand at first.

Well, he was submissive enough even for her, and again she was convulsed with suppressed mirth, for she promised herself keen enjoyment watching his struggles to keep within the bounds of conventionality she had imposed upon him. The whirlings and buzzings of the impaled beetle of her childhood's days, as the luckless insect spun round and round in his efforts to free himself from the transfixing pin, were not in it with the fun held out to her by the writhings of this six-foot-one victim. And the sport was already beginning in his blank face and piteous tone.

"No, I don't think you must even use my name, Justin," she

said, in wind-up of the programme she was laying before him as to his future rule of conduct. “You will be forgetting, and rapping it out when Hilary is here.”

“What then? Would he be very jealous?” returned the victim shortly, very sore with jealousy himself at this recalling of the absent one’s existence.

“Perhaps. There’s no telling,” answered Hermia, with a wholly enigmatical smile. She was thinking that here was a new and entertaining development of the situation. Hilary jealous! Heavens! that would be a feat to have accomplished. She did not believe him capable of any such foolish and youthful passion. And yet, if she misjudged him? And recognising such a possibility, a spice of fear came to season the excitement, only serving however to enhance its original zest.

In the fair scene spread out before these two there was little enough to suggest the growlings and roarings of ravening beasts making terrible the dark night hours. The undulating roll of veldt, green after the recent rains, and radiant in the golden morning, sparkled with innumerable dewdrops. Birds called cheerily; bird-wings glanced through the air in gorgeous colour and flash of sheeny streak; and the great granite kopjes to the westward, rising to the cloudless blue, seemed to tower twice their height in the shimmer and warmth of the newly risen sun.

Upon this lovely outlook one of the two was gazing with a moody brow and a heavy heart. Suddenly he started.

“Who’s this, I wonder?” he exclaimed, shading his eyes.

A speck in the distance had arrested his attention – an approaching speck. It might have represented a horseman, almost certainly it did.

"I believe it's Blachland," went on Spence. "I'll get the binocular, and see."

The advancing object was hidden from sight as he dived into the house. But it reappeared about the same time he did. It now took shape as a horseman.

"Yes, it is Blachland," he went on, the glasses at his eyes. "But he's all alone. Where's his waggon and Sybrandt? I wonder if – " And he broke off, looking somewhat anxiously at his companion as he finished the unspoken thought to himself. What if Blachland were returning thus with a purpose – making a sort of surprise return? What if he had intended returning much earlier, but had miscalculated time and distance? What if he *had* returned much earlier? Oh, Great Heaven! And the thinker's countenance reflected the consternation of the thought.

That of his companion, however, betrayed no responsive qualm. It was as serene and unruffled as though she had never beheld the man at her side until five minutes ago.

"Now, Justin," she said, as they watched the approach of the horseman. "I want to give you a word of warning. First of all, you are not to greet him as if he had just risen from the dead, and you wish to goodness he hadn't. Secondly, you are not to look at and talk to me in a sort of wistful and deathbed manner whenever you have occasion to look at and talk to me. Remember, he's

mighty sharp; I don't know any one sharper. Come, brisk up, dear, and pull yourself together and be natural, or you'll give away the whole show."

"That's the last sweet word I shall hear from you for a long time to come, I suppose," said Justin, somewhat comforted. "But you didn't really mean all you were saying a little while ago? You're not really sorry?"

"Perhaps not," she answered softly. "Perhaps we shall have good times again. Only, be careful now. It all depends upon that."

"Oh, then I'll be careful enough, with that to look forward to," he returned, quite cheered up now. Wherein her object was attained.

To one of the two came a feeling of relief a moment after the new arrival had dismounted at the stockade, for his greeting was perfectly easy and natural and pleasant.

"Well, Spence, you're out early," was all he said.

Out early. Justin began to feel mean again. Should he say he had been there all night? But Hermia saved him the task of deciding by volunteering that information herself. She was not going to begin making mysteries.

Well, there was no occasion to. Both forgot that the crucial moment was not entirely that of the greeting. The last hundred yards or so before dismounting had told Hilary Blachland all there was to tell. No – not quite all.

"What have we got here?" said the returned master of the house, as, after a tub and a change of clothing, he sat at the head

of his table. “Guinea-fowl?” raising the dish-cover.

“Yes, Justin shot five for me yesterday,” answered Hermia. “By the way, I am always calling him Justin. ‘Mr Spence’ is absurdly formal in this out-of-the-way part, and he is really such a boy. Aren’t I right, Hilary?”

“Oh, certainly,” was the reply, but the dry smile accompanying it might have meant anything. To himself the smiler was thinking, “So this is the latest, is it? What an actress she is, and that being so, I won’t pay her the bad compliment of saying it’s a pity she didn’t go on the stage.”

Justin didn’t relish that definition of him; however, he recollected there was everything to console him for the apparent slight. And it was part of the acting. In fact, he was even conscious of being in a position to crow over the other, if the other only knew it, and though he strove hard to dismiss the idea, yet the idea was there.

“By the way, Blachland,” he said, “how are things doing in Matabeleland? Niggers still cheeky?”

“They’re getting more out of hand than ever. In fact, you prospectors had better keep a weather eye open. And, Hermia, I’ve been thinking things over, and I believe you’d better trek into Fort Salisbury.”

“Is there going to be war then?” asked Justin quickly, for the words were as a knell to his newly born fool’s paradise. Had he found Hermia only to lose her immediately?

“No, I’ll stay on. I don’t believe it’ll be anything more than a

scare," answered the latter with a light laugh.

Hilary Blachland had been watching her, while not appearing to, watching them both. The start of consternation which escaped Justin Spence at the prospect of this separation had not escaped him. He noted, too, that beneath Hermia's lightness of tone there lurked a shadowed anxiety. He was sharp, even as she herself had defined him – yes, he was decidedly sharp-witted was Hilary Blachland.

Chapter Seven.
A Limed Bird

"Was the trip a success this time, Hilary? And – where's Mr Sybrandt? Didn't he come back with you?"

"Three questions at once. That's the feminine cross-examiner all over. Well, it was and it wasn't. There was no doing any trade to speak of, and Lo Ben was in a very *snuffy* mood. I found out a good deal that was worth finding out though. Questions two and three. I left Sybrandt half a day's trek the other side of the Inpembisi river."

"And do you think there is really any danger of war?" asked Hermia.

"I think you will be far safer away from here. So you had better go. I'm sending the waggon on to Fort Salisbury to-morrow." And again, without seeming to, his keen observant glance took in Justin's face.

"But I don't want to go, Hilary, and I won't," was the answer. "I'm not in the least afraid, and should hate the bother of moving just now."

"Very well, please yourself. But don't blame me if you do get a scare, that's all."

Heavens! what a cold-blooded devil this was, Justin Spence was thinking. If Hermia belonged to him, *he* would not treat a

question of peril and alarm to her as a matter of no particular importance as this one was doing. He would insist upon her removing to a place of safety; and, unable to restrain himself, he said something to that effect. He did not, however, get much satisfaction. His host turned upon him a bland inscrutable face.

"Perhaps you're right, Spence. I shouldn't be surprised if you were," was all the reply he obtained. For Hilary Blachland was not the man to allow other people to interfere in his private affairs.

"By the way, there are lions round here again," said Hermia. "They were making a dreadful noise last night over in the kopjes. They seemed to have got in among a troop of baboons, and between the lions and the baboons the row was something appalling."

"Quite sure they were lions?"

"Of course they were. Weren't they, Justin?"

"No sort of mistake about that," was the brisk reply.

"Well, I think they were lions too," went on Blachland, "because the one I shot this morning might easily have been coming from this direction."

"What?" cried Spence. "D'you mean to say you shot a lion this morning?"

"Yes. Just about daylight. And a fine big chap too."

"And you never told us anything about it all this time!"

Blachland smiled. "Well, you see, Spence, it isn't my first, not by several. Or possibly I might have ridden up at a hard gallop,

flourishing my hat and hooraying," he said good-naturedly.

But there was a grimness about the very good nature, decided Spence. Here was a man who had just shot a lion, and seem to think no more of the feat than if he had merely shot a partridge. He was conscious that he himself, under the same circumstances would have acted somewhat after the manner the other had described.

"But how did you come upon him?" asked Hermia, eagerly.

"Just after daylight. Started to ride on ahead of the waggon. Came to a dry drift; horse stuck short, refused to go down. Snake, I thought at first; but no. On the opposite side a big lion staring straight at us, not seventy yards away. Slipped from the gee, drew a careful bead, and let go. Laid him out without a kick, bang through the skull. Quite close to the waggon it was too. I left them taking off the skin. There! that's the waggon" – as the distant crack of a whip came through the clear morning air. "We'll go and look at it directly."

"Oh, well done!" cried Hermia; and the wholly approving glance she turned upon the lion-slayer sent a pang of soreness and jealousy through Justin Spence. He began to hate Blachland. That infernal assumption of indifference was really affectation – in short, the most objectionable form of "side."

Soon, the rumble of heavy wheels drew nearer, and, to the accompaniment of much whip-cracking, and unearthly and discordant yells, without which it seems impossible to drive a span of oxen, the waggon rolled up. It was drawn within the

enclosure to be out-spanned.

"You have got a small load this time," said Hermia, surveying the great, cumbrous, weather-worn vehicle, with its carefully packed cargo, and hung about with pots and kettles and game horns, and every sort of miscellaneous article which it was not convenient to stow within. "Ah, there's the skin. Why, yes, Hilary, it is a fine one!"

The native servants gathered to admire the great mane and mighty paws there spread out, and many were the excited ejaculations and comments they fired off. The skin, being fresh, was unpleasantly gory – notably the hole made by the bullet where it had penetrated the skull.

"What a neat shot!" exclaimed Hermia, an expression of mingled admiration and disgust upon her face as she bent down to examine the huge head. Was it a part of her scheme, or the genuine admiration of every woman for a feat of physical prowess, that caused her to turn to Blachland with almost a proud, certainly an approving look? If the former, it served its purpose; for Justin began to feel more jealous and sorer than ever.

"*Nkose*!"

Blachland turned. A native stood forth with uplifted hand, hailing him. He had seen this man among his servants, but did not choose to recognise him first.

"Oh, it is you, Hlangulu?" he said, speaking in Sindabele; which tongue is a groundwork of Zulu overlaid with much

Sechuana and Sesutu. “That is strange, for since you disappeared from our camp on the Matya’mhlope, on the morning that we went to see the King, I have not set eyes on you.”

“*Au*!” replied the man, with a half-smile, bringing his hand to his mouth in deprecatory gesture, “that is true, *Nkose*. But the Great Great One required me to stand among the ranks of the warriors. Now I am free once more, I would fain serve *Nkose* again.”

Blachland looked musingly at him, but did not immediately reply.

“I would fain serve a white man who can so easily slay a great thing like that,” went on Hlangulu. “Take me, *Nkose*. You will not find me useless for hunting, and I know of that as to which *Nkose* would like to know.”

Blachland did not start at these last words, which were spoken with meaning, but he would have if his nerves had not long since been schooled to great self-control.

For, remembering the subject under discussion the last time he had seen this man, whom they had all suspected of eavesdropping, – being moreover, accustomed to native ways of talking “dark,” he had no doubt whatever as to the meaning intended to be conveyed.

“Sit still a while, Hlangulu,” he said. “I am not sure I have not servants enough. Yet it may be that I can do with another for hunting purposes. I will think about it. Here!” – and he handed him a stick of tobacco.

"You are my father, *Nkose*," replied the Matabele, holding forth his joined hands to receive it. Then he stepped back.

"Who is he, and what does he want, Hilary?" said Hermia, who had hardly understood a word of this colloquy; and the same held good of Spence.

"Oh, he's a chap we had at Bulawayo. Wants to be taken on here. I think I'll take him."

"I don't much like the look of him," pursued Hermia, doubtfully.

"I should hang him on sight, if I were the jury empanelled to try him," declared Spence.

But for all the notice he took of them, Blachland might as well not have heard these remarks, for he busied himself giving directions to his "boys," relating to the preparation of the lion's skin, and a dozen other matters. Leaving him to this, the other two strolled back to the house.

"I'm going home directly, Hermia," said Spence, with a bitter emphasis on the word "home." "I rather think I'm the third who constitutes a crowd."

"How can you talk like that, after – " And she broke off suddenly.

"Still, I think I'll go, darling. But – are you really going away – to Salisbury?"

"No. But you've got too speaking a face, Justin dear. Why on earth did you look so dismal and blank when he said that?"

"Because I couldn't help it, I suppose."

"But you've got to help it. See here now, Justin, I can't keep you in leading-strings. You are such a great baby, you have no control over yourself. You're quite big enough, and – "

"Ugly enough? Yes, go on."

"No, the other thing – only I'm spoiling you too much, and making you abominably conceited. Now come in, and give me just one little kiss before you start, and then I think you really had better go."

"Promise me you won't go away without letting me know," he urged, when the above-named process – which, by the way, was not of such very diminutive proportions as she had suggested – had been completed. Outside, Blachland's voice directing the native servants was plainly audible.

"Yes, I promise. Now, go and say good-bye, and get your horse. No, not 'one more.' Do be a little prudent."

"Eh? Want to saddle up, Spence?" said Blachland, as Justin went over to where he was occupied. "All right. I say, though, excuse me; I really am rather busy. Come along, and we'll get out your horse. Have a drink before you start."

"Thanks awfully, Blachland, I've just had one. Good-bye, old chap, don't bother to come to the stable. Good-bye."

The other took a side glance at his retreating guest.

"He's flurried," he said to himself. "These callow cubs don't know how to play the game. They do give it away so – give it away with both hands."

Then he went on tranquilly with what he was doing. He did

not even go to the gate to see Spence off. He simply took him at his word. In social matters, Hilary Blachland was given to taking people at their word. If they didn't know their own minds, not being infants or imbeciles, that wasn't his affair.

Then his thoughts were diverted into another channel, and this was effected by the sight of Hlangulu. The Matabele was standing around, lending a hand here or there whenever he saw an opportunity. For some reason of his own he seemed anxious to be kept on there. That he would be of no use at all as a farm servant was obvious, equally so that he had no ambition to fill that *rôle*. The rather mysterious words he had uttered could refer to but one thing; namely, the exceedingly dangerous and apparently utterly profitless scheme talked over by the camp fire on the Matya'mhlope, and which there could be no doubt whatever but that he had overheard. That being so, was not Blachland indeed in this man's power?

Turning it over in his mind, Blachland could see two sides to the situation. Either Hlangulu designed to render him a service, and, incidentally, one much greater to himself – or his intent was wholly sinister, to set a trap for him to wit. He looked at Hlangulu. The Matabele's aspect was not prepossessing. It was that of a tall, gaunt native, with a sinister cast of countenance, never entirely free from something of a scowl, – in fact, an evil and untrustworthy rascal if appearances counted for anything at all. He tried to think whether he had ever given this man cause to harbour a grudge against him, and could recall nothing of the

kind; but he did remember that Hlangulu was a clever and skilful hunter. Perhaps, after all, he had really gained the man's respect, and, to a certain extent, his attachment. He would keep him, at any rate for a while, but – would watch him narrowly.

"Hlangulu," he called. "Go now and hurry on the herd of trade cattle. It should have been done before this."

"*Nkose*!"

And with this one word of salute the man started on his errand, not asking where the object thereof was to be found, where it had been last seen or anything. All of which was not lost upon Blachland. Decidedly he would keep Hlangulu, he told himself.

Chapter Eight.
"Merely Spence."

"So that's your latest, is it, Hermia?"

The remark was inconsequent, in that it came on top of nothing at all. The time was the cool of the evening, and Blachland, lying back in a deep cane chair, was lazily puffing out clouds of smoke. He had not been talking much, and what little he had said consisted of a few drowsy remarks about nothing in particular. Now, after an interval of silence, came the above inconsequent one.

"My latest! Who and what on earth are you talking about, Hilary?"

"Merely Spence."

"Oh, is that all? He's such a nice boy, though, isn't he?"

"Candidly, he's only like thirty-nine out of forty, colourless."

"How can you say that, Hilary? Why, he's awfully handsome."

"Oh, I wasn't referring to externals, I mean the more important side of him; and – there's nothing in him."

Hermia made no reply, she only smiled; but the smile was meant to convey that she knew better. Nothing in him! Wasn't there? If Hilary only knew?

Truth to tell, however, she was a little relieved. This was the first reference he had made to the subject, and his silence all

these hours had rendered her uneasy. What if he suspected? Now he seemed to drop it as though it were not worth pursuing. She, however, paradoxically enough, intended to let him know that it was. Could she not make him just one atom jealous?

"Poor fellow, he's so lonely over at his camp," she pursued. "It does him good to come over here now and then."

"Who?" said Blachland. His mind was running on the subject of Umzilikazi's grave, and the trustworthiness or the reverse of Hlangulu.

"Who? Why, Justin of course. Weren't we talking about him?"

"Were – yes, that's it. We were, but I had forgotten all about him, and was thinking of something totally different. What were you saying? That he was lonely in camp? Well, that's very likely; but then, you see, it's one of the conditions attendant upon prospecting. And he may as well chuck prospecting if he's going to spend life galloping over here."

Thought Hermia to herself, "He is a little jealous after all."

The other went on: "He's lonely in camp, and you're lonely here. That's about the British of it; eh, Hermia?"

"Well, can you wonder? Here I am, left all by myself to get through time as best I can. How long have you been away this time? Four weeks?"

"Just under. And this was a short trip. It is hard lines, rather; but then, you always knew what life up here was going to mean. You did it with your eyes open."

"It is mean of you to throw it at me. I never thought you would

have done it," she flashed.

"Throw what? Oh, I see. I wasn't referring to – that. You might as well give me the benefit of the doubt, Hermia. You ought to know that I was referring to our coming out here at all. We might have gone anywhere else, so it wasn't England."

She looked down at him as he sat there, for she was standing, or restlessly moving about. How cool and passionless he was now, she thought. He had not always been so. Decidedly he was tired of her. She could not help drawing a mental contrast between him and the other. The countenance of this one, with its well-cut features, but lined and weather-worn, dark and bronzed by sun and exposure, was indeed a contrast to that of the other, in its smooth, clear-skinned blue-eyed comeliness of youth. Yet, this one, sitting there, strong, reposeful-looking in his cool white raiment was, and would always be, *the* one when she came to pass in review her polyandrous experiences.

Now his very tranquillity, indifference she called it, nettled her. At any other time, indeed, it would have served as a powerful draw in keeping her to him; now however, the entirely fresh excitement she had struck formed an effective counterblast. If he was tired of her, she would let him see that she was even more tired of him, whether she was so or not.

"To revert to Spence," he said. "What pleasure can it give you to make a bigger fool of the young idiot than his parents and Nature have already made him?"

"He isn't at all a fool," snapped Hermia, shortly.

"Not eh? Well, everything is relative, even in terminology. We'll call him not so wise as some other people, if you prefer it. If he was as wise, he might be over head and ears in love with you without giving it away at every turn – in fact, thrusting it into the very face of the ordinary observer."

"Why, Hilary, you really are jealous!" she cried with a ringing laugh. For a moment, however, she had looked perturbed.

"Ha, ha! That's good – distinctly good. Jealous! There is, or ought to be, no such thing, once past the callowness of youth. The self-respect of any man should be above whining to any one woman because she prefers somebody else. The mere fact of her doing so renders her utterly valueless in his sight there and then."

"You don't really mean that, Hilary?" she said. "You're only just talking, you know."

"Try it and see."

His eyes were full on hers. For the life of her, she could not as straightly meet that straight, firm glance. This was the only man she had never been able to deceive. Others she could hoodwink and fool at will, this one never. So, with a light laugh, with a shade of nervousness in it that would have been patent to an even less acute faculty of perception than his, she rejoined —

"Well, you're out of it this time, Hilary. Justin isn't in love with me at all. Why, it's ridiculous!"

She turned away uneasily. For he knew that she was lying, and she knew that he did.

"One moment, Hermia," he called out to her. She paused.

"While we are on the subject: are you not getting a little tired of – our partnership?"

"Why?"

"I've seen symptoms of it lately, and I don't think I'm mistaken. Because, if you are, say so squarely and openly. It'll be much better in the long run."

"I think you are tired of it," she flashed. "I suppose you have a lot of black wives over yonder, like that disgusting old Pemberton and Young. That's why you're so fond of going into the Matabele country, and leaving me all alone for weeks."

"Apparently you know more about Pemberton's and Young's conjugal arrangements than I do, but let me assure you you're utterly wrong in your estimate of mine."

"I don't believe it. You are all of you alike, once you take to going among those beastly natives."

"You don't believe it? That I can't help, so there it stays. And now I've lazed long enough, I must rustle about and see to things."

Left there, Hermia watched his tall form, like a pillar of white, wending up the low kopje at the back of the stockade. He had become very reserved, very self-contained and inscrutable of late; so much so indeed, that it was almost impossible to gauge how much he knew or suspected. Now she felt uneasy, uncomfortable with a dim consciousness of having come off second best in the recent cut and thrust. Well, perhaps he was right. She was tired of the existing state of affairs – perhaps a trifle tired of him.

And he? The kopje up which he had taken his way, ascended by an easy acclivity to a point which commanded an immense view to the south and westward. Range upon range of rolling slope and wooded ridge lay there outspread – vast and scarcely inhabited country, a land given over to wild game and a few shrinking, starving remnants of tribes living in daily fear of the sweep of the terrible Matabele besom. The evening was still, and golden, and beautiful, and, seated under a mahobo-hobo tree, Blachland lit his pipe, and began to think out the position.

So Hermia was tired of their life together! He had seen it coming on, and at first the knowledge had caused him some concern. He contrasted the lives of other pioneers, living all alone, or in native fashion, with two or three dusky-hued daughters of the land, in rough, uncivilised manner, growing more and more into the happy-go-lucky, soulless simplicity of life of the barbarous aborigines themselves, – contrasted them with the life he himself led, its comfort, and refined companionship, and, until lately, love, – and, doing so, a qualm of regret tinged his mind. It was evanescent however. For he himself was growing tired of this mode of life. He had embarked on it when he and Hermia had reckoned the world well lost for each other's sake. Now, neither of them so reckoned any more; nay, further, to be perfectly candid with themselves, they wondered how they ever could have. Why not leave it then, move to some more cheerful and civilised quarter of the globe? To do so would be tantamount to leaving each other.

Hermia had taxed him with being jealous, and he had replied, and rightly, that he was past the capacity for any such foolishness. But he had no intention of remaining her dupe. That he had ample cause for jealousy in the matter just under discussion, he was well aware; but that was nothing to what he would meet with should they return to civilisation together. She could no more cleave to one, and one only, than she could fly over the moon. They had better part.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.