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The White Hand and the Black: A Story of the Natal Rising

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Содержание

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Prologue

A weight had fallen from him – the weight of a lifetime; the galling, hopeless, demoralising weight which had paralysed his energies, sterilised his brain, and, in the case of a subject less clear-sighted, would have brought him down to drink or suicide, possibly both. And now it had fallen from him.

The man on the mountain top looked around, and as he did so, something of buoyancy that he had not known for years, came over his mind. He was free – free. His life was now his own. He could have sung aloud in the stillness of the night. And yet the said night was not one calculated to effect excessive exaltation in any mind. It was oppressive and boding; and even its usual voices, of bird and beast and insect life, seemed hushed as in awe of something impending. The broad moon glared drearily down, ghastly athwart a filmy haze; and ever and anon a heavy boom seemed to shake the earth, while huge, plume-like masses

of cloud rising higher and higher above the cliffs and ridges, gleamed beautiful in golden depths with every intermittent flash. When the storm broke it would be an appalling one, but to the man on the mountain top this brought no misgiving whatever, yet he knew that it would overtake him long before he had time to reach home.

He knew something else, knew that it was vital to him to choose his steps carefully. For the summit was flat and to all appearance smooth and unbroken, yet it was seamed with crevices; crevices partly or entirely hidden by the coarse, sour herbage; crevices of no great width but some of them awful rifts, into which should a man fall, he would he entombed by that lonely mountain height until the crack of doom. But this man had no intention of undergoing any such fate. He knew his ground well, and, knowing it well, moved with especial care.

All of a sudden he was conscious of a quick tingling of the blood, but he had sufficient control neither to stop nor look round. He only *listened*; listened with an acute, almost painful intensity. He had seen nobody, had heard nothing, yet that strange sixth sense of realisation had told him that he was no longer alone on the mountain top.

For a moment a quiver or qualm of superstition shook even his mind. What consideration on earth could have brought any being other than himself – any *human* being – up here to-night? Yet even the misgiving of superstition was a relief. The thing to be feared was the presence of such human being.

He whirled round quickly and suddenly. Just as he had thought. In the flash, lighting up the whole plateau, something dropped; disappeared behind a flat boulder not fifty yards away, and in that flash the man on the mountain top realised that he had to do with a human being. In which case every instinct of self-preservation cried out loudly that the other must not leave the mountain top alive.

There was something cat-like in his movement as with incredible speed and agility he made straight for the spot. Something sang past his head. It was not the breeze – now sweeping the tableland in fitful puffs. It was something which he heard strike the stones behind him with a steely ring. Then he had grappled with the figure behind the rock.

It rose, to fully his own height. Something else that was steely gleamed in his eyes – a broad, formidable blade. But the wrist of its wielder was grasped with a grip as of iron.

The huge white mountainous cloud, lit up by un-intermittent lightning flashes, now illuminated this life and death struggle with weird, lamp-like effect. For it was a life and death struggle. The white man could not, by every known law of self-preservation, let any witness get away from this place a *living* witness. The dark man, by the same intuition realised that fact, and such being the case realised also that he was in the position of a "cornered" animal. He must fight – hard and desperately – for his life. And he came of a race of hard and desperate fighters.

Neither spoke. Both were equally matched, the white man,

tough, powerful, and in the pink of training; the dark man lithe, cat-like, but accustomed to depend more on quick sinuosity of movement than on sheer muscular power. Moreover he was armed, and his opponent was not.

Armed. One quick deft stroke of that broad-headed short-handled stabbing spear, and where was the other? Yet he could not deliver it. His adversary had bent back his arm. In his iron strength he had forced it out to its full length behind, well nigh dislocating it at the shoulder. The dark man could not even change the weapon into his left hand. And, so sudden had been the onslaught, that his great knobbed stick lay on the ground, yards away.

Wait. The white man could have made an end of the struggle at any moment. He was armed – though to all intents and purposes not – and this is how such a paradox unravels. He had a fully loaded five chambered revolver upon him, but it was a matter of vital importance to refrain from firing a shot on this silent, lonely mountain top at such a moment. So for all practical purposes he was an unarmed man.

Yet his plan of campaign was clear – clear, fell, and remorseless. He had seen what his opponent had not; and now by every effort of his straining, powerful muscles he was forcing that opponent steadily backward. For in the weird light of Heaven's fires above and around he had detected a certain line in the waving grass bents, which labelled its own character. His adversary should perform his own funeral.

His said adversary was giving way. In fact he was gathering himself for a final spring. Still no word between the two men. Only the deep heave of laboured, but carefully husbanded breathing. Now and then something like a cracking sound, as joints and muscles tightened. Then the dark man suddenly and with a mighty effort, wrenched himself free, and – disappeared.

Disappeared. For a fraction of a second the great white fiery cloud shed its gleam upon an appalled face and rolling eyeballs, and a convulsive clutching of two sinewy hands at the grass tufts; and then upon the white man standing once more on the mountain top – alone.

He stood for a few moments panting after the struggle. Then, having recovered breath, he took a couple of steps forward and peered down into the narrow black rift. No sound came up. He found a stone, and dropped it in. A rattle or two against the rocky sides, and then silence. Only the thunder boom, now growing fainter, relieved it from time to time: but still the immensity of the white fiery cloud shed its lamp-like light, upon him and the scene of this silent tragedy. Then he made a careful search around. The weapon that had been flung at him he picked up, also the great knobstick, and dropped them over into the rift; and as he smoothed back the trampled grass into position as best he could, for the first time he spoke.

"*Hlala gahle*! A fighter's weapons should be buried with him, and this is a right fitting tomb for such."

Again he glanced around. The flat, table-like mountain top

was silent once more. It was time to descend, and having thus decided, a new and louder thunder roll from a dark curtain swiftly moving up from another direction caused him no anxiety but rather the reverse. The witness of one tragedy had furnished material for another, and the storm now coming up would thoroughly and effectually eliminate any possible remaining trace of either.

Chapter One.
Of an Unwonted Peril

The girl was drawing.

From where she sat a great mountain head, turreted with bronze-faced krantzes, rose up against the unclouded blue, set off by a V-shaped foreground of tossing, tumbling foliage – in a word, virgin forest. The grass was long in the little open space, and in and among the trailers hanging like network from the trees, birds were making the warm air merry with many a varied call and pipe. Now and then a grey monkey, reassured by the repose of the human occupant of the spot, would climb partly down, almost above her head, and hang, perking his black face in a knowing attitude, as though quite competent to criticise the water-colour sketch now rapidly taking shape: to skip aloft, chattering, as some sudden movement on the part of the artist appealed strongly to his instinct of self preservation. And then the dark shadowy depths of the surrounding trees would be alive with responsive mutterings and cackles, where the less venturesome of the troop lurked, awaiting further developments.

She, of such sights and sounds took no notice, for had she not been born and bred among them, and did they not constitute the ordinary surroundings of everyday life? Seated on a low flat rock, her colour box and water tin beside her, she worked on serenely

in the warmth of the windless air, in nowise feeling the latter oppressive, for she was used to it.

She made a pretty picture as she sat there – a very pretty picture had there been any spectator to appreciate it. A large-brimmed hat of coarse straw lay on the ground beside her, and an aureole of golden hair, brought low down on the forehead, framed a very uncommon and striking face. If the smooth skin was a trifle sun-browned why that only served to enhance the clearness of the thoughtful blue eyes. These, lifting every now and then, in the process of her work – beneath well defined brows – were wide, straight and fearless, and the delicate, oval contour of the face, and the set of the full, expressive mouth, left nothing to be desired.

The piping of the bird voices, and the hum and drone of winged insects kept up unceasing chorus on the sunlit air, and then breaking in upon them all came another sound. It was the grating chatter of the honey bird – the *nomtyeketye* of the natives. Clucking to and fro the insignificant little brown bird kept up his ceaseless chatter, and the girl looked up. She likewise looked round for something to throw at him, for his persistency was becoming a bore. In her infantile days when, with her brothers, this little friend would often pilot them to a wild bees' nest, and, at the cost of a sting or two, an unexpected feast of fat combs, he was welcome enough. Now his use had gone by. Yet he persistently skipped hither and thither and chattered on.

The sun, now mounting above the trees, began to shed his

rays, and that with no uncertain touch, upon her uncovered head, fusing the aureole with yet a more dazzling gold. Instinctively she picked up the large hat, and, rising, proceeded to pin it on. This movement produced another.

Produced another. Yes, and as startling as it was unexpected. Barely a dozen feet distant, where the dense shaggy growth touched the open, there shot up the head of a huge snake.

The girl stood as though turned to stone. She had no great fear of snakes in general, but this: why she had never seen one like it before. It was not a python, for it was of a strange, shining orange colour, and it had the heart-shaped head of the venomous species: moreover on the said head there was an erection of scales forming a kind of crest. It was hissing hideously, and the sinuous coils beneath the uplifted neck were squirming in a manner horribly suggestive of a rush and a spring. The girl simply dared not move – no, not even a finger. Had it been an ordinary snake, her course was easy, to retire quietly. But this – why it had only to hurl itself its own length – or very little more – and then?

She stood, perfectly motionless, her hands still as they were – in the attitude of pinning on her hat. Her face had gone white and cold and clammy, and her eyes dilated; yet she dared not turn them away from the monster, or even lower them. A horrible fascination was upon her, such as she had often read about and openly scoffed at. And then all upon her mind was borne the tales she had heard from natives and up-country men about a very rare and terrible variety of the *imamba*, which reached

an enormous size, and, unlike the serpent tribe in general, was actually aggressive and would attack without provocation. But this species was so rare that many even doubted its actual existence.

She dared not move – dared not stir a finger. Her hands were still raised to her head, but she dared not move them down, however gently. Her arms were aching with the strain, and still she stood staring at the glittering eyes, the gently waving neck, the black, forked tongue trickling forth and then withdrawing, and it seemed to her that that awful festoon of coils was gliding imperceptibly nearer. A lifetime of agony seemed concentrated in those few moments. Should she break the spell, and dash away as fast as ever she could run? And then she suddenly recognised that this was just what she was absolutely powerless to do. She could not move. The dread fascination was complete.

From sheer exhaustion her uplifted arms dropped to her sides. The movement either startled or enraged the formidable reptile, or both, for it emitted a hideous, whistling kind of hiss, and with a quick movement drew back its head and neck into a rigid curve as though to hurl itself forward. And the girl was powerless to move.

Crack – crack!

Two reports, like pistol shots, rang out behind her, and simultaneously a voice.

"Step back quietly. I'll take care of this."

Again the sharp reports, this time three – in rapid succession.

But they were not from any firearm: they proceeded from a remarkably well plaited and well wielded raw-hide whip.

All unperceived a horseman had entered the open glade. Upon him the infuriated reptile now turned – which was precisely what he wanted to happen.

Backing his steed, a process to which that intelligent quadruped was by no means averse, he faced the great snake, firing a succession of whip cracks at it.

"Now run," he called out. "I'll draw the brute on."

But he had reckoned without the innate ferocity of the said brute, for now uttering a fiendish hiss, it hurled itself straight at horse and rider. Nearly the whole of its huge length seemed to rise from the ground in that tremendous leap. The horse instinctively reared itself up on its hind legs, receiving the deadly fangs full in the chest, then whirling round, fell – fell right on to the writhing monster. And the rider?

With rare readiness of nerve and judgment the latter had slid from the saddle at exactly the right fraction of a moment, and now stood contemplating a furious convulsive intermingling of kicking hoofs and heaving coils. One deft slash of the raw-hide whip was capable of cutting the head off the terrible reptile, if only he could get it in. Then he suddenly grasped the fact that there was no need to do anything further at all. Though still squirming hideously the monster was dead. We have said that the horse, in falling, had come right down upon the reptile, and now it was found that the iron pommel of the saddle had snapped

its vertebrae. The destroyed had in turn become the destroyer. It had avenged itself.

Its owner, however, gave it no thought just then. He turned to the girl. She was standing, with a large stone poised in her hand, a look of desperate resolution in her eyes. The man, for his part, decided that here was a picture he should never forget; the erect stateliness of the pose: the expression: the sublimity of a great resolution which had crushed down terror. She was magnificent, he told himself – lovely too.

"Why didn't you make yourself scarce while you could?" he said. "I told you to, you know."

"I wanted to see if I could be of some use," she answered, dropping the stone which she had instinctively picked up as being the only approximate form of weapon at hand. "I should certainly have been killed if it hadn't been for you. And the wonder is you weren't. But your horse – I suppose there's no chance for him?"

"None whatever. The bite of a mamba of that size and volume is absolutely fatal to man or beast."

"It is a mamba then? But the size of it?"

"Yes. It's the *indhlondhlo*– the crested variety. I've only seen one before, and it was nothing like the size of this. They are rather scarce."

"And a good thing too," said the girl with something of a shudder as they stood contemplating the still moving coils of their late enemy. "Your poor horse has revenged himself. Poor beast! Will his death be a painful one?"

"I don't think so. A stupor, more or less gradual, usually attends death from snake-bite."

As though to bear out its owner's words, the poor animal, which had risen to its feet, now tottered, swayed, and then lay down.

"Well, I shall have to walk. But that's nothing. I'm in hard training."

The girl's eyes opened wide.

"Walk? That you certainly will not, except as far as the house; and that's no great distance. It's nearly dinner time too," – with a glance upwards at the sun. "And – you have saved my life, you know. I'm a bad hand at making a speech, but – will you take for granted all I'd like to say?"

The other felt a little foolish. This, to him, was an entirely new experience. This girl, for instance, was quite unlike any he had ever known before. Her absolute self-possession, free from any trace of posing or self-consciousness – why he did not know what to make of the situation. But one thing pushed itself unpleasantly to the fore in his mind. He was being taken somewhere to be thanked – by a lot of other people, and he didn't like being thanked. It made him feel a fool. The only thing to do was to pooh-pooh the whole incident; and yet – and yet – hang it, he did want to see some more of her, and wanted to see that some "some more" now, not put it off to some indefinite future time.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, rather lamely. "The affair was of no great account. You'd have got out of it anyhow. I think

perhaps, I'd better start. Good-bye."

But she ignored the proffered hand. She deliberately put hers behind her back.

"Doesn't it occur to you," she said, "that I may be a little bit nervous going home alone after that experience? There may be another of the same species – what did you call it —*indhlondhlo*? – somewhere near. I never was afraid of a snake before."

Then he surrendered with a good grace – a very good grace – and profuse apologies.

"I confess I missed that point of view. Let me collect your painting things. Do you often come here to draw?"

"Yes, and everywhere else. I love it. I believe I could do something real in that way if only I had a show." And there was a clouding over of the speaker's face that was not lost upon her escort.

"By Jove! I should think you could," he answered, scrutinising the nearly finished sketch. "Why, this is perfect."

"I don't know if it'll ever be finished," she said. "I believe I'd be scared to come and sit here again. I don't know. I'll bring a shot-gun loaded with buckshot. No snake on earth could stand against that."

"Rather not," answered the other, vastly amused by this readiness, a downright matter-of-fact way of looking at things. "I suppose – er – you know how to handle firearms."

"Oh yes. I've learnt that. But I never bother about carrying them for purposes of defence. There's no use for it here."

"What about the natives? Is it quite wise for you to go rambling about the veldt alone, do you think?"

"Of course. Why they have known me all my life, and I have known them. There isn't one of them anywhere round here who wouldn't – give his life for me, I was almost going to say – let alone harm me."

The other was still more puzzled, and relapsed into silence for a little, thinking even yet harder as to the personality of the other actor in this strange adventure. She, for her part, was no less busied with regard to him. She saw beside her, as they stepped along the bush path together, some six feet of well-proportioned British manhood, not exactly in the first youth, and yet on the right side of middle age; and the bronzed face and clear eyes told of healthy wholesome living, and the readiness of resource of their owner she herself had just had an opportunity of gauging. The result was satisfactory.

The bush path ended, then a narrow one bordering a quince hedge which shut in a fine fruit garden. Here they overtook a man, who, at sound of footsteps, turned inquiringly – a tall man, with a strong, good-looking face and full brown beard just streaking with grey. The girl's clear voice broke the silence.

"Father. This gentleman has just saved my life."

Chapter Two.
The New Magistrate

The older man started.

"What's that?" he said quickly, looking from the one to the other.

Briefly she told him. This was a man not easily moved, but he was then.

"And I should have been lying there instead of that poor horse," concluded the girl.

"I should think you would." Then, to the stranger, "Well, sir, I don't quite know what to say to you or how to put it – but I believe you can understand."

The said stranger, almost writhing from the force of the hand grip which the other was administering to him, realised that he did understand. This strong, impassive-looking man was obviously moved to the core, but what seemed passing strange was that he refrained from any little outward and natural act of affection, or even word, towards his child who had just escaped a horrible death. No, that omission, indeed, he could not understand.

"Why, of course," he answered. "But I'd better introduce myself. My name's Elvesdon, and I'm the new magistrate at Kwabulazi, so we shall not be very distant neighbours. I hope,

too, that we shall become very much better acquainted."

"Same here. I'm Thornhill, and I own about thirteen thousand *morgen* (about double that number of acres), most of which you can see from where we stand, and a good deal of which is of no earthly use except to look at – or to paint," with a smile at his daughter.

"It certainly is very good to look at," said the stranger. "Does it hold much wild game, Mr Thornhill?"

"Middling. See that line of krantz yonder?" pointing to a craggy wall, about a mile away. "Well, that's all bored with holes and caves – I was going to say it was filled with tiger (leopard) like bee-grubs in a comb, but that's a little too tall. Still there are too many. Are you a sportsman, Mr – Elvesdon? Though – you must be, after what I've just heard."

"I'm death on it. Where I've come from there wasn't any."

"Where's that?"

"The Sezelani. All sugar cane and coolies. Beastly hot, too. I'm jolly glad of this move."

"Well I hope you'll make up for it here. There's a fair number of bushbuck in the kloofs – duiker and blekbok too, guinea fowl, and other small fry. So be sure and bring your gun over whenever you can and like."

"Thanks awfully," replied Elvesdon, thinking he would manage to do this pretty often.

They had reached the homestead. The house was a one-storeyed, bungalow-like building, with a thatched verandah

running round three sides of it. It stood on a slope, and the ground in front fell away from a fenced-in bit of garden ground down a well-grown mealie land, whose tall stalks were loaded with ripening cobs. Then the wild bush veldt began. Black kloofs, dense with forest trees; bush-clad slopes, culminating in a great bronze-faced krantz frowning down in overhanging grandeur; here and there patches of open green as a relief to the profusion of multi-hued foliage – in truth in whatever direction the eye might turn, that which met it was indeed good to look at, as the stranger had said.

The said stranger, as they entered the house, was exercised by no small amount of curiosity. Of what did this household consist? he asked himself. The other members of the family, for instance, what were they like, he wondered? Like this girl – who had struck him as so unlike any other girl he had ever seen? Like her father – who in his own way seemed almost to stand unique? But beyond themselves there seemed to be nobody else in the house at all.

The room he was ushered into was cool and shaded. It was got up with innumerable knick-knacks. There were water-colour sketches on the walls – and framed photographic portraits placed about on easels. There was a piano, and other signs of feminine occupation. But nothing was overdone. The furniture was light and not overcrowded, thoroughly suitable to a hot climate. After the noontide glare outside, the room struck him as cool and restful to a degree – refined, too; in short a very perfect boudoir.

"Nice little room, isn't it?" said his host rejoining him, for he

had excused himself for a minute. “Yes, that portrait – that’s my eldest boy. Poor chap, he *was* killed in the Matabele rising in ’96. That other’s the second – I’ve only the two. He’s away at the Rand; making his fortune – as he thinks; fortunately he’s got none to lose.”

“What fine looking fellows,” said Elvesdon. “By Jove they are.”

The other smiled.

“That group there,” he went on, “represents Edala in various stages of growing up. You’ll recognise the latest.”

“Yes. It’s a splendid likeness.” The while he was thinking to himself, “Edala! what an out-of-the-way name. Edala! Well, it fits its owner anyway.”

“I daresay you’d like a cold splash – we’ll have dinner directly. Come this way. You’ll find everything in there,” opening the door of a spare room.

His host’s voice almost made Elvesdon start, so wrapped up was he in his new train of thought. It did not leave him, either, when he was splashing his head and face in a basin of cold water. Truly this was a strange beginning to his new term of office; for he had only been at Kwabulazi a few days. Well, it was a good one anyhow.

On entering the dining-room he did not know whether to feel surprised or not. Only three places were laid. There was no Mrs Thornhill then? These two – father and daughter – were alone together.

But before they had got half through the meal Elvesdon became alive to something. There was not that freedom and cordiality between the two, that whole-souled intimacy of companionship, which under the circumstances might have been expected. A kind of constraint seemed to rest between them, and yet why? It was puzzling. Remembering the real emotion displayed by his host when the latter had learned what had occurred that morning, it was even more puzzling. He did not fail, however, to note that the affection seemed mostly on the parental side. This struck him as strange: nor did there appear to be anything to account for it. There was nothing of the tyrannical or even irritable type of parent about his host, who, on the contrary, seemed calm and quiet and considerate in everything he said or did; he himself had been greatly taken with him. What then could it mean?

Ah, now a solution presented itself. The girl had probably contracted some engagement, or wanted to, to which her father had objected. And in the result there was an estrangement between them. He had seen one or two cases of the kind before. The thought, however, seemed to depress him though half-unconsciously. Yet why should it? What could it possibly matter to him – he asked himself. Yes, what the devil could it matter to him? Thus pondering, he joined in the conversation in a half-absent kind of way, though wholly unconscious of any such frame of mind. The fact, however, did not escape his host, who was divided in opinion as to the cause.

"I suppose you've had a good deal of experience in the native department," said the latter, when they had got into roomy cane-chairs on the verandah and pipes were in full blast. Edala had retired, announcing an intention of having forty winks and reappearing when it was cooler.

"Fair. I was on the Pondo border for a time. It was more interesting, in a way, still I'm glad to get back here."

"What do you think of these rumours of unrest?" said Thornhill.

"There is unrest, and it wants careful handling. Still you haven't got to believe everything you hear. I've been doing a round since I came, trying to get at the general feeling. I was at Tongwana's kraal this morning and the old chap was profusely civil, so were all his people: in fact it was on my way back from there that I – er – first met your daughter."

"Oh, Tongwana? Yes, he's all right. By the way, I was forgetting. If you'll excuse me for a minute I'll send some boys down to collect your saddle and bridle."

"Thanks. I daresay you could lend me some sort of a mount to get home on, could you?"

"Oh, you shan't walk," said Thornhill, drily, over his shoulder.

He soon returned, and the two sat chatting over things in general and the neighbourhood in particular; as to which latter Elvesdon was loud in his appreciation. It was delightful country, he declared, and this farm especially was charmingly situated. The other smiled.

"Well, ride over whenever you feel inclined. We shall always be delighted to see you," the speaker had grown grave, and his hearer knew what he was thinking about. "I don't know if you're very hard-worked. I know that outlying Civil servants are not as a rule – your predecessor certainly wasn't. So whenever you don't know what else to do with yourself, why this isn't an overpoweringly long ride. We might get up a day in the kloofs when the close time is over."

Elvesdon jumped at this, and then Edala reappeared, stating two indisputable facts – that it was cooler, and, incidentally, tea-time. At last, with many a qualm of reluctance, he got up and declared it was time to go.

"Must you?" said the girl, with a quick lift of the eyes which he thought infinitely captivating.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Thornhill, though I do it with reluctance. Stern duty calls, you see. There's no moon, and I don't know this part of the country at all yet. I should get hopelessly entangled for the night in some most impenetrable part of the kloofs, and I have to hold Court early to-morrow; for there happens to be rather a lot to get through."

"Edala, dear," said Thornhill, "just sing out to them at the back to put Mr Elvesdon's saddle on – the horse I told them."

The girl reappeared in a moment, and then good-byes were interchanged. To Elvesdon's relief nothing more was said on the subject of his timely aid, but he was appreciative of a great cordiality of manner.

"Here's something that'll carry you, Mr Elvesdon," said Thornhill, as a horse was brought round to the stoep, a well groomed, capable looking beast with good paces. "You needn't trouble to send him back again, if you'll oblige me by accepting him. You lost your own on my account you know."

But the other began to protest. Why all the horses in the world would be cheap at the price of what his own had been able to effect, he declared with, at that stage, somewhat unnecessary vehemence. Besides it seemed too much like accepting a reward for what he had done, though this he did not say.

"You are not offended, are you?" said Thornhill.

"Offended? No. But – er – "

"Well, I shall be if you refuse to do me this favour, so let's have no more *indaba* on the subject," rejoined Thornhill, shortly.

The other gave way. He saw no alternative, for the last thing in the world he desired was to offend Edala's father. The latter's next words made the situation easier.

"Hope we shall see you again soon. Remember you'll always find a real welcome here at any time, so don't stand on ceremony. Good-bye."

The younger man echoed the word heartily as he rode away. And then something struck him as funny. He was accustomed to issuing orders to other people, and now the positions were reversed. He had been dictated to, and that by no official superior but by a stranger of a few hours' acquaintance, and he had meekly done as he was told. Yes, it was funny.

The two stood looking after him as he disappeared down the bush path. Then the girl said:

"Father, what have you done? You've given away Ratels – yes, given him away. And you've often said you wouldn't part with him for five times his real value."

"Yes. But I've never said I wouldn't part with him for fifty thousand times – for fifty million times his real value."

He dropped a hand upon her shoulder – that was all – then turned abruptly and went inside. The girl standing there alone gazed forth upon the tossing splendours of the sunlit wilderness, but actually seeing nothing of them, for her eyes were dim and moist. A struggle was going on within her. Then the lips, which had begun to tremble, hardened into firm compression. The struggle was over – unfortunately.

Chapter Three.
The Stranger from Zululand

At the time we make his acquaintance Michael Thornhill did not take his stock-farming seriously, but rather as a pastime. This he could afford to do, as from one source or another he had enough to last him comfortably for the rest of his life, and also to start his remaining son in anything sound and likely to bear good results.

His operations, then, in that line just paid their way, but very little more – a result in nowise due to any lack of capacity on his part, for he had gone through the mill himself in earlier life and was as thoroughly at home in all pertaining to stock-raising as the most strenuous and practical farmers in the colony. But he had a hobby, and it was a good one, and that was – literature.

Not the manufacture of it – oh no – or we might have felt bound to withhold the qualifying adjective. The absorption of it – ancient and modern – was his craze and his delight. He never had found time to indulge this during a hard-worked and hardening life, but had always looked forward to a good time coming when he should be able to do so. Now it had come.

It may be wondered why he did not settle down in some town, where there was a good library, and acquaintances from whom he could borrow useful books; and indeed several did venture so

to hint. But his answer was simple. He had lived in the veldt all his life – up country or down, or on the road. He would feel lost if he did not wake up to hear the multifold sounds of the bush – to inhale the fresh, strong, sweet air as the sun shot up fiery over tree-fringed ridge or iron mountain top. And the life of the veldt! It had always been his life – it was too late to change now. To look round on the black wildness of those bushy kloofs, or yonder great mountain, frowning down majestically, with its mighty cliff wall shining red in the afterglow of the sunset, and to realise that he owned all this – that this fragment of splendid Nature was his property – all his own – why the realisation was sheer ecstasy. Whereby it is obvious that there was a large element of the poetic about the man.

Exchange all this for a sun-baked, dust-swept town? Not he. It had even been hinted to him by well meaning acquaintances – mostly of the feminine persuasion – that there was his daughter to be considered, that life alone in a wild and sparsely colonised part of the country was rather a dull life for a girl. This was certainly touching him on a susceptible point, but to such representations he would reply that even up-to-date fathers were entitled to some consideration – that even they could not be required to take a back seat in every question. For the rest there was nothing he denied his daughter which by any possibility he could procure for her; moreover she could have as many friends to stay with her as the house would hold, and for as long as she chose. But somehow she seldom had any. For some reason or other they rarely came.

This, however, did not trouble Edala in the least. She was not particularly fond of other girls. She was too individual for most girls of her age. They could not quite make her out. And – there may have been another reason.

But on this score Edala herself never complained. Her occupations and amusements filled up all her time, and she never felt lonely. She could shoot, too, and sometimes, when out with her father, would turn over a big bushbuck ram streaking across a small open space, as neatly as he could himself. This was only when they were alone together. If there was a regular hunt she never took part in it.

Her ambition Was to become an art student, at one of the great centres. She firmly believed in her own capabilities in that line. Her father had taken her to Europe on purpose to show her all that was best of the kind, and she had come back more dissatisfied than ever. She wanted to join the regular ranks – to start at the bottom of the ladder. But Michael Thornhill had a will of his own.

"Patience, dear," he would say. "You have plenty of time before you, and I don't see the fun of raising children to have them desert me just when I want them most."

Edala had not taken the remark in good part. She had flashed forth that it was no good having anything in one, if one was to be stuck away on a Natal farm all one's life with no opportunity of bringing it out. Her father shook his head sadly.

"There may come a day when you will be glad to find yourself

back on that same Natal farm," he said. Then he went out.

Of this he was thinking as he sat in his library a few mornings after Elvesdon's timely appearance. Why now should he not let her have her way? Why should he not send her to Europe as she wished? He himself could sell or let the farm, and trek far up country on a protracted hunting expedition; for the idea of life here without Edala was not to be thought of for a moment.

There was more than a sense of thwarted ambition which came between himself and the child he idolised. The dark cloud that separated them took the form of a dead hand. Black and bitter suspicion corroded the girl's mind, and when the consciousness of it was more especially brought home to Thornhill from time to time, the whirlwind of vengeful hate that stormed through his heart was simply inconceivable. But not towards her. It was retrospective.

Just such a paroxysm was on him now. He could not read. He gazed listlessly around at his well filled book-shelves – with their miscellaneous stock of literature – in which he took such pleasure and pride, but made no move towards disturbing their contents. A restlessness came upon him. He could not remain still. Jumping up, he put his head through the window and shouted out to the stable boy to saddle up a horse.

Edala was on the stoep as he passed out. She was putting some finishing touches to a water-colour drawing. In his then mood he did not suggest that she should accompany him; perhaps he feared the effect of a refusal or a reluctant consent.

"Are you going out, father? It's awfully hot."

"Yes, I'm going a short round. Back by dinner time."

Three or four great rough-haired dogs, lying in the shade behind the stable, sprang up as the horse was led forth, whining and squirming with wild excitement at sight of the gun in their master's hand. He, however, drove them back; he was not going to hunt, but there was always the chance of coming across unwary "vermin" – a jackal perhaps, or a *rooikat*.

The first point he made for was the scene of yesterday's episode. As he approached it a low hum of voices was borne to his ears. Some half dozen natives stood clustered round the spot. The carcase of Elvesdon's horse lay swollen and distended, tainting the air, and beside it the great snake. But on the latter was their attention concentrated.

"*Whau*! but that was the very king of serpents," one of them was saying. "I, who am old, have never seen one like it – no never."

"M-m!" hummed his hearers. "*Nkose*!"

This in respectful greeting as they became aware of the new arrival's presence. He acknowledged it.

"I, who am old, have never seen one like it, *impela*," repeated the speaker. "*Nkose*. The snake – the king of snakes – has killed the horse, but who has killed the snake?"

"The horse," said Thornhill. "He fell over on it and broke its back, just after it had struck him."

"It is the horse of – of – the new magistrate – at Kwabulazi,"

went on the other. "He was at my kraal just before."

"That is so, Tongwana. Here is *gwai*," getting out a large snuff-horn, which came in handy on such occasions.

"*Nkose*!" cried the chief, receiving it in both hands. He was an old man, with a white beard, and, of course, head-ringed. Two of the others were also ringed. As Thornhill told the story of the occurrence many were the murmurs of surprise that went up. The new magistrate at Kwabulazi was clearly no fool of a white man, and this inference impressed them greatly.

One of them, however, it did not seem to impress at all, and that was one of the ringed men. He had listened in a careless, almost contemptuous way to the narrative, uttering no remark or interjection. He was of fine stature, and unlike Tongwana and two or three of the others, wore no article of European clothing; wherein he showed taste, for the savage in his *mútya* alone looks an immeasurably finer savage than his brother clad in the same, with a super-added shirt, usually none too clean. Him Thornhill set down as a Zulu from beyond the border: but at the same time he was vaguely conscious of having seen him somewhere before.

This man now, without a word of farewell greeting, detached himself from the group, and began to walk leisurely away. Then it became noticeable that he walked with a slight limp.

"Bullet in the war of '79 did that," decided Thornhill grimly, as he looked after him. "Wonder if he'll compete for another distinguishing mark of the same kind before long." Then aloud —

"Who is he?"

They looked at each other.

"He is a stranger, *Nkose*," answered Tongwana with a whimsical smile. "From the other side?"

"*E-hé*."

"Yet it seems I have seen him before. No matter. For the rest, *amadoda*, the house is very near and contains that which is good to eat and drink. The *Inkosazana* (lit. Little Chieftainess) is there, and will see to that. I return soon myself. *Hambani gahle*!"

They were delighted, and chorussed a sonorous farewell. Thornhill made it a rule to treat his native neighbours on liberal and friendly terms, consequently the relations between them were of the best. None of his stock was ever missing nor did he ever lack farm servants. Incidentally, some of his white neighbours disagreed with him on the point. They said he was spoiling the natives. But, out of the plenitude of his experience he had found it a policy that paid.

Now, when after a few minutes' ride along the bush track he overtook the stranger, that worthy's demeanour towards himself constituted quite an unusual experience. It was off-hand, to say the least of it, almost offensive.

"May I not have first right to ride along the paths on my own farm?" began Thornhill, banteringly. For the path here was exceedingly narrow with high thick bush on either hand, and the other showed not the least anxiety to make way for him, but strode on as though there was no one within a hundred miles.

It was all Thornhill could do to restrain himself from bringing down the butt of his gun hard and violently between the broad, shining shoulders. It was, if possible, more difficult still, as the stranger replied, without halting or even looking back:

"Patience, Inqoto. The path is not wide enough for two."

This *gazula*– or addressing a white man familiarly by his native name, even though that name in this instance was a complimentary one, referring to decisiveness of character – would have led then and there to a breach of the peace on the part of most white men, especially as the tone of the speaker bordered on the contemptuous. This one only waxed coldly sarcastic.

"I see you, King. *Bayéte*, King of the Heavens and the world! Elephant! Lion! Divider of the Sun! Shaker of the Earth!" he went on, giving the other half a dozen more titles of royal *sibongo. "Whau*! It is truly the Great Great One come to life again, for who else in these times would walk about my farm armed with assegais?"

The path had now widened out. The savage halted and stepped aside.

"Do you know me, Inqoto?" he said. "Have you ever seen me before?"

"Surely. O Elephant. In another world," came the ready and sarcastic reply.

"M-m! In another world. But it is in this world you shall see me again, Inqoto. Ah, ah! In this world. *Hamba gahle*!"

With which farewell, insolently sneering, the speaker turned

and strolled leisurely away.

Chapter Four.
The Magistracy at Kwabulazi

The magistracy buildings at Kwabulazi, consisted of a roughly built thatched bungalow, a red brick oblong which was the Court house, and various groups of native huts which served to house the other Court officials – white and coloured – and the handful of mounted Police permanently quartered there. Another red brick structure represented the Post and Telegraph Office. The place was situated at the foot of a great mountain whose wooded slopes made, scenically, a fine background. In front the veldt rolled gently away; quite open, and sparsely dotted with mimosa; and for miles around, at intervals, rose the smoke of native kraals; for this was an important location.

Within the red brick oblong mentioned above Elvesdon sat, administering justice. There was not much to administer that day, for the cases before him involved the settlement of a series of the most petty and trivial disputes relating to cattle or other property, protracted beyond about five times their due length, as the way is with natives once they get to law. Beyond the parties concerned there was no audience to speak of. Three or four old ringed men, squatted in a corner on the floor, drowsed and blinked through the proceedings; while now and again two or three natives would enter noiselessly, listen for a few minutes and

then as noiselessly depart.

The morning was drawing to an end, for which Elvesdon was not sorry. It was very hot, and the Court room was becoming unpleasantly redolent of native humanity. He was about to adjourn, when he became aware of the entrance of somebody. Looking up he beheld Thornhill.

The latter stood leaning against the wall just inside the door. Elvesdon, while putting three or four final questions to a voluble and perspiring witness, found himself wondering whether Thornhill was alone, or whether his daughter, preferring the shade and open air to the heat and stuffiness of the Court room, was waiting for him outside. So he sent down the witness and adjourned the Court straight away.

Thornhill crossed the room to shake hands with the clerk, whom he knew, and who was gathering up his papers, then he adjourned to the magistrate's office.

Thither Elvesdon had gone straight on leaving the bench. If he had one little weakness it was – well, a very adequate sense of his official position, but only when not off duty – and this weakness suggested to him that it might impress the other more if he received him there, instead of going forward to greet him in the emptying Court room. As a matter of fact Elvesdon did show to advantage to the accompaniment of a tinge of officialdom, but, we are careful to emphasise, only at the proper time and place.

"Come in," he called out in response to a knock. "Ah, Mr Thornhill, I'm so glad to see you," and there was no official

stiffness now about his tone or his handshake. “Anything I can do for you? But unless it’s of first-rate importance it’ll keep till after lunch, which you are going to take with me. So let’s go and get it.”

They went out into the fierce noontide glare, but even it was an improvement after the stuffiness within. Elvesdon called to a native constable to take Thornhill’s horse, and wondered if he felt a twinge of disappointment as he saw there was only one horse to be taken care of. Groups of natives squatting about in the shade, fighting all the points of evidence over again, saluted as they passed.

The clerk joined them at table. He was a thick-set stolid youth, with a shock of light hair, and a countenance wooden and mask-like; without much conversational ability, but a first-rate man at his work. For living purposes, he inhabited a couple of native huts, but messed with his official chief: which in many cases was a bore, as the latter subsequently explained to Thornhill; but Prior had had the same arrangement with the former man, and he couldn’t turn the poor devil out to feed by himself, which in that eventuality he would have had to do. Besides, he was a very decent fellow even if a bit heavy on hand.

During lunch they talked about sport, and the state of the country, and ordinary things. Immediately afterwards the clerk went out.

“Well, I’m getting firm into the saddle here, you see,” said Elvesdon, as they lit their pipes. “And I’m not sure that the

situation isn't going to turn out interesting."

"Think so? Look here, I haven't exactly come to look you up officially, still as my round took me rather near Kwabulazi, I thought I'd give you a look in and mention a little matter."

"Well whatever the 'little matter' may be, I'm glad it had that effect. And now what is it?"

Thornhill told him about the meeting with Tongwana and his people, and the mysterious stranger who was in their company. Told him too of the outrageous impudence of the man in refusing to get out of the way for him.

"It was all I could do to keep my hands off him," he said. "Nothing but the thought that he'd certainly use his assegais and I should have to shoot him dead in self defence kept me from pounding him between the shoulders with the butt of the gun as he swaggered along."

"And this was quite near your house, you say?"

"Yes. Right bang on the spot where you so pluckily saved my girl's life, Elvesdon. I've heard all full details now."

Elvesdon reddened slightly, but he was secretly pleased.

"Oh, come now," he protested. "I don't know that it requires much pluck to crack a whip at a snake. And if it comes to that, I think it was your daughter who showed the pluck. I told her to cut and run while I drew the brute off. D'you think she would? Not a bit of it. She had picked up a whacking big stone and was standing there ready to heave it. I tell you it was a magnificent sight. Suggested a sort of classical heroine up-to-date. But – I

say. Do you think it's altogether safe for a girl to go about so much alone round here?"

"Round here I do. The people have known her since she was a little thing and take a sort of proprietary interest in her. For the rest, she can use a six shooter – and that quickly and straight. I taught her."

Elvesdon was on the point of observing that she was not provided with that opportune weapon at the critical moment of a few days previous, but an instinctive warning that it might seem a little too much like taking the other to task caused him to refrain. But he said:

"What of that swaggering impudent swine we were talking about? Supposing he were to pay your place a visit in your absence?"

"There are four great *kwai* dogs who'd pull down the devil himself at a word from either of us – you saw them, Elvesdon. As an alternative Edala would drill him through and through – with no toy pistol, mind you, but real business-like lead, if he made the slightest act of aggression. Besides, a Zulu from beyond the river, and a head-ringed one at that, wouldn't. So, you see, she's pretty safe."

"Oh, he's a Zulu from beyond the river, is he?"

"So Tongwana said. And he looked like one."

"And he was carrying assegais?"

"Rather. Two small ones and a big *umkonto*. I chaffed him, gave him royal *sibongo*, and it made him mad. You know,

Elvesdon, how these chaps hate being chaffed."

"Of course. But I think I'll have this one looked after. Anyway he's no business cutting about with assegais. I don't want to arrest him though, if it can possibly be avoided. That sort of thing only irritates the others, and does no good, unless of course you can prove anything distinctly against them; which, just now, you hardly ever can." Then, raising his voice, "*Wa, Teliso*!"

In obedience to the shout a man came forward, emerging from behind the Court house. He was a native detective attached to the magistracy. Saluting, he stood and awaited orders.

Then those three – the two white men seated on the steps of the stoep – held a quarter of an hour's conference, speaking rapidly, and in the vernacular. Teliso thought he knew the stranger. His name? No, that he could not say – as a matter of fact he knew it perfectly. He might be able to find it out – given every facility. Was he from beyond the border, and if so who was his chief? Of this too, Teliso professed ignorance, though he could find out, given time and every facility. Here likewise, he was in a position to give perfectly correct answers then and there, but Teliso was in his humble way a Government official, and thoroughly understood the art of "magnifying his office." He was not going to adopt any such undignified course of procedure as to give a direct answer. He looked forward to being sent on a secret mission, with many days of pleasant sojourn among the kraals of his countrymen, well regaled with plenty of beef and beer, and – other things. So he reiterated his ability to find out

all about the stranger if entrusted with that delicate errand. At that, for the time, he was dismissed.

"What sort of chap's that, Elvesdon?" said Thornhill relighting his pipe.

"Haven't tried him yet. Why?"

"You may have to 'try' him yet, in another sense," returned Thornhill, drily, shading the third match with his hand. "Look here. I don't want to seem to run your show for you, but I've been here a goodish while, and I *hear* things. If you'll take a tip from me – you're not obliged to, you know – you won't trust everything to Teliso. Don't mind my saying that?"

"Certainly not. In fact, I'm obliged to you. To my mind if there's anything idiotic in the world it's making light of the experience of men of experience."

"Well, you can always command mine – on the quiet of course – and I shan't be in the least put out if you don't agree with it. Now I can see you're longing to get back to your job, so I'll saddle up."

"Er – the fact is, I've got a lot of these tin-pot cases to worry through – so I'll get you to excuse me. By the way, Thornhill, I'm going to take you at your word, and invade you on Sunday. I'm beastly all-by-myself here when there's no work. How does that pan out?"

"Any number of ounces to the ton. Come as early as you like, and, there's a bed for you, if you don't want to get back here till next morning. Good Lord, Elvesdon, when I think of – "

"But, don't 'think of'," interrupted the other, hurriedly. "Very

well. So long – till Sunday."

Thornhill's horse had been brought round, and as he got into the saddle Elvesdon turned away to the Court house. And the latter as he got there, felt as if he was treading on air. Yet why should he – why the devil should he? – he kept unconsciously asking himself.

Thornhill, passing the clerk's quarters, saw the latter just coming out.

"Hallo, Prior!" he hailed. "Good-bye, I'm off."

The young man came over to him.

"Good-bye, Mr Thornhill," he said. "You don't often look us up in these days."

"You don't often look me up, Prior, for the matter of that."

"Oh well, Mr Thornhill," said the other shamefacedly. "I should like to, you know. Er – may I come and try for a bushbuck someday?"

"Why of course you may, man, any mortal time you feel inclined, or can. By the way, how do you like your new chief?"

"No end. He's – er – he's such a gentleman."

There was a world of admiration – of hero worship in the young man's tone, and colonial youth is by no means prone to such.

"Ah," replied Thornhill. "Well, I agree with you, Prior. Good-bye."

Chapter Five.
The Ethiopian Emissary

The kraals of the chief, Babatyana, lay sleeping. So brilliant was this starlight, however, that the yellow domes of the thatch huts could be distinguished from the ridge – even counted. The latter operation would have resulted in the discovery that the collection of kraals, dotted along the wide, bushy valley, numbered among them some three hundred huts; but these, of course, represented only a section of the tribe over which Babatyana was chief.

It is a strange sight that of a large, sleeping kraal – or a number of them, in the wizard hush and calm beauty of an African night. It is so in harmony with setting and surrounding; the starlight showing up the ghostly loom of mountain, or suggesting the weird mystery of dark wilderness lying beneath, where deadly things creep and lurk. And then, these human habitations, themselves constructed of the grass which springs up around them, of the very thorns which impede the progress of their denizens, they stand, in primitive symmetry – not rude, because that which is circular is nothing if not symmetrical – lying there in their pathetic insignificance under the vast height of Heaven's vault. And the said denizens sleeping there! Hopes and fears, virtues and vices; capacity for intrigue, cupidity; redeeming

traits, human weaknesses – all the same, whether sleeping within the kraal of the savage to the lullaby of the voices of prowling creatures of the night, or in stately mansion amid the roar and rattle of the metropolis of the world. All the same – all, all!

The air is fresh and sweet with the fragrance of flowering shrubs, is faintly melodious with the ghostly whistle of circling plover invisible overhead. The cry of a jackal rings out from the hillside, receding further and further, to be answered again from another point in the misty gloom – then the bark of a restless dog in some slumbering kraal beneath. Or the hoot of a night bird hawking above the silent expanse, and the droning boom of a great beetle mingling with the shrill, whistling voice of tree frogs. Man is silent, but Nature never.

Along the ridge overlooking Babatyana's kraals a dusty waggon road winds like a riband, distinguishable from the darker veldt in the starlight. It follows the apex of the ridge, and is just the place to avoid during those dry thunder-storms which in Natal seem to hunt in couples nearly every day during the hot months. Then the wayfarer may well leave the highway, and dive down into one of the bushy kloofs on either side, and wait until the turmoil passes; for the lightning will strike down upon that high, exposed pathway, every sheeting flash not much less dangerous than a shell from hostile artillery.

To-night, however, the elements are at peace, but man is represented by a single unit.

Natives, as a rule, are not given to wandering about alone at

night, but this one is obviously here with a purpose. Like a statue he stands, gazing down the road as though on the look-out for something or somebody. He is a tall man, and ringed: and as he wraps his blanket closer around him – for there is a tinge of chill in the night air – and takes a few paces, it might be seen that he walks with a slight limp.

Another hour goes by, and still he stands, ever watchful, and suffering nothing to escape him, for the patience of the savage is inexhaustible. And now a glow suffuses the far horizon, widening and brightening; then the broad disc of a full moon soars redly aloft, and lo, the land is steeped in subdued unearthly light – plain, and ridge, and distant mountain, all stand revealed; and the clusters of domed huts in the broad valley beneath show out sharply defined. But these are no longer silent. First a low, long-drawn wail, then another and another from different points, culminating in still more drawn out howls, and the dismal sounds echo through the silence in weird cadence. Half the curs in the slumbering kraals are baying the newly risen moon.

Her light falls full upon the watcher, throwing out his tall form into statuesque relief, and glinting on the polished shine of his head-ring. But for the limp his gait as he slowly paces up and down would be a stately one. Even then there is an unconscious dignity about the man, as with head held proudly aloft, he gazes out over the moonlit expanse, and it is the dignity of a natural ruler of men.

Suddenly he stops short in his walk, and stands, listening

intently. You or I could have heard nothing, but he can, and what he hears is the sound of hoof-strokes.

Down the road now he takes his way, walking rapidly, and soon the hoof-strokes draw very near indeed. Then he stops, and starts singing to himself in a low, melodious croon.

The horseman appears in sight, advancing at a pace that is half jog-trot, half canter. The moonlight reveals a thick-set, burly figure, encased in a suit of clerical black. But the face which now shows between the bow of the white "choker" and the wide-awake hat is not many shades lighter than the whole get-up.

"*Saku bona, Mfundisi*," is the greeting of the watcher, whose singing, purposely turned on to guard against the horse shying or stampeding at the sudden appearance of anything living, has had that effect.

"*Yeh-bo*," answered the other. "Do I see Manamandhla, the Zulu?"

"Of the People of the Heavens am I, *Umfundisi*," was the reply, but the tone in which the speaker enunciates the word "Umfundisi" – which means "teacher" or "missionary" – contains a very thinly veiled sneer. "The people down there have been awaiting you long."

"In the Cause, brother, in our holy Cause, no man's time is his own," answered the horseman, sanctimoniously. "*Whau*! have not I been inoculating its sacred principles into the people at Ncapele's kraal – or striving to, for Ncapele is old, and when a man is old enthusiasm is dead within him. It is the young whom

we have to teach. Wherefore I could not turn my back upon him too soon."

The speaker did not think it necessary to explain that the undue time it had taken to roast the succulent young goat which Ncapele had caused to be slaughtered for his refection had had anything to do with the lateness of his arrival. For that chief, although "a heathen man," was not unmindful of the duties of hospitality. Which definition applied equally to Manamandhla the Zulu; wherefore the attitude of that fine savage towards the smug preacher to whom he had undertaken the office of guide, was one of ill-concealed contempt.

"And the people – the people of Babatyana," went on the latter, "are they ready to hear the good news – the glorious gospel of light and freedom?"

"They are ready," answered Manamandhla, who was striding beside the other, easily keeping pace with the horse. "They are ready – ah-ah – very ready."

"That is well – very well."

Here was an edifying picture, was it not, this zealous missionary, labouring day and night to spread the good news among the benighted heathen, and he one of their own colour? They, too, waiting to welcome him, to give up their night's rest even, in order to hang upon his words – truly a heart-stirring picture, was it not?

We shall see.

Guided by Manamandhla by short cuts across the veldt, the

traveller was not long in reaching his destination. His arrival had been momentarily expected, and with the first distant sounds of his horse's hoofs, the carcase of a recently slaughtered goat had been quartered up and placed upon a fire of glowing embers. The preacher rubbed his fat hands together with anticipatory delight as his broad nostrils snuffed from afar the savoury odour of the roast.

"Ah brother, the people are ever hospitable to those who bring them tidings of the Cause," he remarked, complacently.

"And to those who do not," rejoined the Zulu.

Assuredly the emissary had no reason to complain of the substantial nature of his reception, and so decided that worthy himself, as he sat within the chief's hut, tearing the juicy meat from the ribs with his teeth, and washing it down with huge draughts from the bowls of *tywala* which had been brought in. Ah, it was good to live like this. Meat – everywhere – plenty of it, wherever he went – meat – fresh, and succulent and juicy, as different as day from night to the dried up, tasteless, insipid stuff to which he sat down when in civilisation. *Tywala* too – newly brewed, humming, and, above all, plentiful. Yes, it was good! He had taken off his black coat and waistcoat, mainly with the object of preserving them from grease. Indeed had he followed his own inclination it is far from certain that he would not have taken off everything else. It was a disgusting spectacle, this fat, smug, black preacher, sitting there in his shirt, his white choker all awry, tearing at the steaming bones like a dog, his face

and hands smeared with grease; a revolting sight, immeasurably more so than that of the ring of unclothed savages who were his entertainers and fellow feasters.

Nothing was heard but the champ of hungry jaws. Such a serious matter as eating must not be interfered with by conversation. At last there was very little left of the carcase of the goat but the bones, and one by one the feasters dropped out and leaned back against the walls of the hut.

The latter was lighted by two candles stuck in bottle necks, a device learned from the white man. Babatyana and several others started pipes, also an institution learned from the white man. But Manamandhla, the conservative Zulu, confined himself to the contents of his snuff-horn. Secretly, in his heart of hearts, he held his entertainers in some degree of contempt, as became one of the royal race. Babatyana was an influential chief, but only so by favour of the whites. What was he but a Kafula (term of contempt used by Zulus for Natal natives)? But Manamandhla was far too shrewd to impair the success of his mission by suffering any of his secret feelings to appear.

All the same, although he lived on the wrong side of the river from the other's point of view, there was very little admixture of baser blood in Babatyana's system. His father had been a Zulu of pure blood and his mother very nearly so. They had crossed into Natal as refugees, after Nongalaza defeated Dingane, and had there remained. Seen in the dim light of the candles, Babatyana was an elderly man, with a shrewd, lined face; in fact there was

no perceptible difference in his aspect or bearing from that of those who affected to despise him. Now he turned to his guest.

"The news, brother, what is it?"

"The news? *Au*! it is great. Everywhere we have our emissaries; everywhere the people are listening. They are tired of being dogs to the whites: tired of having to send their children away to work, so as to find money to pay the whites. Soon our plan of deliverance will be complete, soon when we have brought home universal brotherhood to those of one colour – and, brothers, the time is now very near."

"And that time – when it comes – who will lead the people, *Umfundisi*?" asked an old head-ringed man who was seated next to the chief.

"The leader will be found," was the ready answer. "It may be that he is found – already found."

"Is he found on this side of the river or on the other?" went on the old man, who was inclined to "heckle" the visitor.

"That, as yet, is dark. But – he is found."

A murmur went round the group. They were becoming interested. Only Manamandhla remained perfectly impassive. He made no remarks and asked no questions.

The conversation ran on in subdued tones, which however grew more and more animated. The emissary was glib of tongue and knew how to hold his audience. At last Babatyana said:

"It sounds well, Jobo. Now is the time to tell it – or some of it – to the people outside. They wait to hear."

The Rev. Job Magwegwe – by the way the name by which the chief had addressed him was a corruption of his "Christiana" name – was an educated Fingo, hailing from the Cape Colony, where he had been trained for a missionary, and finally became a qualified minister in one of the more important sects whose activity lay in that direction. But he promptly saw that in the capacity of missionary he was going to prove a failure. Those of his own colour openly scoffed at him. What could he teach them, they asked? He was one of themselves, his father was So-and-So – and no better than any of them. The whites could teach them things, but a black man could not teach a black man anything. And so on.

But luck befriended the Rev. Job. The Ethiopian movement had just come into being, and here he saw his chance. There was more to be made by going about among distant races where his origin was not known, living on the fat of the land, and preaching a visionary deliverance from imaginary evils to those well attuned to listen, than staying at home, striving to drill into a contemptuous audience the "tenets" of a dry-as-dust and very defective form of Christianity. So he promptly migrated to Natal, and being a plausible, smooth-tongued rogue soon found himself in clover, in the official capacity of an accredited emissary of the "Ethiopian Church," whose mission it was to instil in the native mind the high-sounding doctrine of "Africa for its natives."

Chapter Six.
A Native Utopia

The open space outside the kraal was thronged. Hundreds had collected in obedience to the word of the chief. More were still coming in, and the preacher rubbed his fat hands together with smug complacency. Your educated native is nothing if not conceited, and the Rev. Job Magwegwe was no exception to this rule. Here was an audience for him; a noble audience, and, withal an appreciative one.

His appearance was greeted by a deep murmur from the expectant crowd, which at once disposed itself to listen. He had resumed his black coat and waistcoat and settled his white choker; he was not going to omit any accessory to his clerical dignity if he knew it.

He led off with a long prayer, to which most of those present listened with ill-concealed boredom, but the smug self-conceit of the man had captured his better judgment, and he was only brought up by Babatyana remarking in an audible aside that the people had not assembled to take part in a prayer meeting but to hear the news. So he took the hint and started his address.

He began by sketching the history of the people, within their own time. Since the days of the old wars they had increased immensely and were still increasing, so that soon the land would

not be able to hold its population. It would hold them but for the white man. The white man. But was this the white man's land? Did Nkulunkulu (Literally, "The Great Guest." one of the names for the Deity) give him this land? No. The white man came over the sea in ships and took it. Nkulunkulu said "This is the black man's land and here have I placed him," yet the white man took it. The whites came over in small numbers, then more. But even now what were their numbers? Why, a handful, a mere handful. The whites who ruled them could live in an ostrich's nest, when compared to the blacks whom they had dispossessed. And why had they been able to dispossess them? Because there was no unity among the native nations. Each was jealous of the other and none could combine. The time, however, was at hand when these dissensions should be of the past; when all the native nations should unite, when their native land should belong to them and not to the white man, when the Amazulu and the Basutu, the tribes in Natal and the Amampondo and the Amaxosa should all possess their own again, should all dwell together as brothers, none lording it over the other, should dwell together in peace and unity in the land which Nkulunkulu had given to them – to them and not to the white man.

The preacher was working himself up to a pitch of eloquence that impressed his audience – and a native orator can be very eloquent indeed. Murmurs of applause greeted his periods, and now as he paused to wipe his clammy forehead with the white handkerchief of civilisation, these grew quite tumultuous. Only

Manamandhla the Zulu kept saturnine silence. He knew who, in this wonderful brotherhood of equality, was going to have the upper hand, and any idea to the contrary moved him to mirth, as too absurd to be worthy of a moment's consideration.

But the ways of Nkulunkulu – went on the preacher unctuously – though sometimes slow were always sure, and now He had revealed His will to some who had come across great distances of sea to bring it to them; not white men but black like themselves. These had come hither with a message of deliverance to all the dark races, and he himself was a humble mouthpiece of such. But there were many such mouthpieces. They were everywhere, and were being heard gladly. Who could refuse to hear them? The people of this land were being oppressed and trampled upon; and so it was wherever the white man set down his foot. Let them look at the past. Where were the nations that dwelt proudly in their own lands? Gone, utterly gone, or slaves to the white man; who planted his own laws upon them and punished them heavily if they did not obey.

The crafty rascal however found it convenient to ignore the fact that the worst that the white man had ever done to them was a joke when compared with the treatment formerly meted out to the black man by his brother black. Then he proceeded to quote from the Scriptures.

There was a fair sprinkling of *amakolwa* among his audience, i.e. those who had been converted to Christianity – of a sort – and these now listened with renewed zest. They would appreciate

his arguments, and afterwards make them plain to their fellow countrymen not so privileged, in their discussions from kraal to kraal.

He deftly quoted from the history of the Israelites, and their deliverance from the Egyptian bondage, making out that these were in similar bondage, that the promises made to Israel were given to them too. He went further. He even assured them that they were offshoots of Israel, cleverly citing numbers of their national and tribal customs, some obsolete but many still in force, which exactly corresponded with the precepts of the Mosaic law. The great book of the white men which revealed the will of Nkulunkulu, he declared, was wrongly so called, in that it was not revealed to white men at all, but to dark men. The whites had stolen it, as they stole everything.

A deep bass hum of applause broke from his audience. It was a strange scene. The vast assemblage held spellbound, the preacher, arrayed as one who preaches the gospel of peace, instead, swaying this multitude of dark savages with the gospel of revolt and war, and all the ruthless atrocity of horror which such represents. All spellbound there in the clear light of the broad moon, flooding down upon ridge and valley, and loom of mountain misty against the stars.

For upwards of another hour the preacher went on, the entranced audience drinking in every word. They could have listened to him all night, but he had too much natural astuteness to risk repeating himself.

"Brothers," he concluded, "I have shown you your bondage. You are increasing, as the chosen people of old, and the more you are increasing the more you have to pay in taxes to the white man; the more you have to submit to his slave-imposing laws. You may say – as many have said – 'What can we do? The white man has cannon and we have the assegai, what chance then have we?' But even the white man's cannon is not able to go everywhere, and even if it could, there is a more powerful weapon still. There are those who rule the whites who will lift up a voice in your behalf. Who will say – 'Stop. This has gone far enough. We will not have our black brethren butchered solely because they are black.' I know what I say, for I have seen and talked with such. 'Stop,' they will say. 'Bloodshed must cease.' And the nation will approve because war costs money, and white people are no fonder of having to pay than are black people. Then when their fighting men are withdrawn – then we will rise in our might, in one overwhelming black wave, and sweep all these whites back into the sea, whence they came. Be patient. You will have 'the word' in good time and that time soon. I have shown you your bondage, now I am showing you your way out, for it is the will of Nkulunkulu. I have done."

A deep murmur arose. The vast multitude, moved to the core, took some time to realise that the proceedings were over. Then it broke up. Many remained on the ground, squatting in groups, eagerly discussing the points put forward; others broke up, and in twos or threes, or singly, departed for their homes. Among the

latter was Teliso the native detective.

Not all, however, so went. There was a disposition among some of the headmen to probe further the speaker's statements. Who were these rulers among the Amangisi (English) who would call upon their countrymen to stop the war? enquired the old man who had shown a disposition to heckle the preacher in Babatyana's hut. He was old, but he had never heard of the chiefs of any people who would seek to turn that people back in the moment of their victory. *Whau*! this was wonderful news, but – who were they?

"M-m! Who are they?" hummed the others. But the Rev. Job was not nonplussed.

"They are among the head indunas of the nation," he replied. "The ways of the white man are not as our ways, else that which I have been telling you would seem so much childish folly. Brothers, you will remember how the indunas of the Amangisi treated the Amabuna (Boers) when they had conquered them many years ago. They gave them back all their lands, and went away. They lost hundreds and hundreds of fighting men at the hands of the Amabuna, yet they gave them back all their lands, nor did they even exact any tribute. And what happened yesterday? After three years of fighting, wherein thousands and thousands of Amangisi were slain, did they not pay the Amabuna largely to make peace? Are they not preparing even now to give them back their lands once more? *Whau*! And even so will they deal with us."

"And the King?" put in Babatyana with his head on one side. "The King of the Amangisi? What will he do with such indunas as they?"

"He will do as his indunas advise, brother, for such is the way with the Amangisi."

"A king who is ruled by his indunas is as a dog that is wagged by its tail. U' Tshaka!" returned Baba tyana vehemently, swearing by the name of the great Zulu. And the others murmured assent.

"Yet it is so, *amadoda*. I, who have seen, I, who know, tell you so."

And the confidence with which the speaker declared this, the certainty in his whole manner and look, staggered the doubters. In such wise was the venom drop injected by these snakes in the grass fostered and educated all unknowingly by the agencies of philanthropy and civilisation.

"Great news have we heard this night, brothers. But, even though we drive the Amangisi out, have we not to reckon with the Amabuna? They are terrible fighters. Not all the tribes in the world could drive *them* out, *impela*!"

The speaker was Teliso, who had joined a group which was discussing what they had heard.

"Not all the tribes in the world!" repeated one, derisively. "Hear that!"

"Even that Lion, Dingane, had to flee before them," urged the detective.

"Ha! Was there not another Lion of Zulu that roared louder,

and divided the nation? But for this they had been driven out themselves."

"M-m!" hummed another. "That is as the preacher says. Combine – do not divide."

"And this preacher – will he speak again here?" asked Teliso innocently.

"Not here. At Nteseni's Great Place. There will he speak. But many will go from here to listen."

The detective was on the point of asking whether he was likely to cross to the other side, and talk with the chiefs in Zululand, but judged it wise not to seem too curious. He could find that out later, for he had made up his mind to be one of those who should go on from here to Nteseni's Great Place.

For Teliso was having a good time. There had been a fair season and food was plentiful. The people were hospitable; and he was just as fond of meat and *tywala* as any other native. He was faithful to his employers, the Government, according to his lights, but his pay was not on a luxurious scale, and the risks he ran were at times considerable. So he made up his mind to combine pleasure with business – to lay himself out to have a good time. And – who shall blame him?

Chapter Seven.
Of a Day of Rest

Sunday had come round – had dawned, just such a morning as anybody could have wished, cloudless, glowing – warm of course, it would be hot in an hour or so, but Elvesdon, like other people, was used to this at the time of year and cared not a rush for it, especially as he was dressed accordingly.

His horse was being led up and down before the stoep by his native servant. The animal was chafing impatiently as though aware that it was bound for its old home. It was the horse that Thornhill had pressed upon his acceptance, and somehow Elvesdon could not help wishing that he had not. The animal was a fine, useful, well-looking beast – this he fully appreciated; but somehow he could not shake off the idea that it was a sort of compensation for what he had been able – privileged – to do, and this idea he did not like in the least.

Well, after all, it was a mistake to be too thin-skinned, he decided. Probably the donor did not look at it in that light at all. At any rate he was going to put in a long, enjoyable day in the company of the said donor – and in that of somebody else; so, in the best of spirits, he raised the stirrups by a hole or two and swung himself into the saddle.

"So long, Prior," he called out to the clerk, who was standing

by, watching his departure. “I may or may not be back to-night, but in any case shall be here in the morning in time to open as usual.”

“All right, sir. So long.”

The young man gazed after him, perhaps a trifle wistfully. The day would be a bit dull without him. He had grown to like his new chief more than a little, as we heard him admit to Thornhill in no uncertain tones, and enjoyed his conversation. Well, he would get through the day as he had got through so many other Sundays – taking it thoroughly easy; with a pipe, and the last illustrated papers out from England and a magazine or two: then a snooze in the heat of the afternoon, and perhaps a smoke and chat with the sergeant of Mounted Police. And he was used to it.

Elvesdon rode on, his pulses keeping pace with every elastic bound of his steed. He was in the very heyday of his prime, and in the full health and strength of his physical being rejoiced in the sheer joy of living. Higher and higher mounted the flaming wheel of the sun above the roll of those golden plains; and sheeny winged birds, flashing from frond to frond, seemed to echo in their gladsome piping the exaltation which thrilled through his own heart. What was it that had given rise to this new exaltation, this new interest? He did not trouble to answer the mental, unformed question; he realised it, and that was sufficient.

From the open, undulating plains his way dived down suddenly, by a rocky path, into the rugged broken country where deep kloofs, dense with thick growth, fell away, their black

slopes overhung perchance with craggy rock walls whose ledges gave anchor to the spiky aloe, or scarlet hung Kafferboen. Each labyrinthine defile widened out into another, or to a grassy bottom shaded by the smooth wall of a red ironstone krantz rising majestic and sheer. The chatter of monkeys skipping among the tree-tops, mingled with the clear whistle of spreeuws in the cool shade, the whole dominated by the deep, hoarse bark of the sentinel baboon, aloft among the crags, keeping wary watch upon the unseen troop digging for succulent roots on the hillside below.

On high, beyond the wildering trees cresting the ridge on the further side of the valley, a great red turret stood forth against the blue of the heavens. Elvesdon recognised that he was near the scene of the adventure, and now the deep-mouthed baying of dogs, as though suddenly roused, yet somewhat distant, showed that he was nearing his destination; for the clink of hoof-stroke, and the jingle of bit, carries far in a still, clear atmosphere and hilly country.

A rush of dogs, bellowing, open-mouthed, met him as he paced up the last slope, but their hostility died down to muttered grumblings as they recognised the horse, if not the rider, as they escorted both to the house. Thornhill came forth.

"Glad to see you," he said as they clasped hands. "Going to be hot, I think. Come inside."

Then a hail having extracted a boy, from somewhere behind the house, Ratels was taken away to be off-saddled, and was soon seen, prancing and neighing in an adjoining paddock, as though

in sheer delight at finding himself at home again. Then Edala appeared. Her greeting of the visitor was perfectly frank and self possessed, but Elvesdon was surprised to find himself feeling, for the moment, a trifle disappointed that there was not a little more cordiality about it. But the straight glance of her blue eyes was charming, so too was the lift of upper lip shewing the gleam of white teeth, in her welcoming smile.

"I've kept my resolution, Mr Elvesdon," she said. "I haven't been out by myself without a shot-gun since. In fact, I believe I've caught myself almost wishing another *indhlondhlo* would show up so that I might try conclusions with him, this time not at a disadvantage."

"I wouldn't like to insure the snake, Miss Thornhill," laughed the other.

"Thanks. You know – old Tongwana was round here a day or two afterwards, and he was saying you must be *tagati* indeed to have escaped. In fact I don't think he and the others who were with him more than half swallowed what had happened – a set of unbelieving Jews."

"Well, do you know, it would make rather a tall story. It was so absolutely a case of poetic justice. I don't believe I should get more than seven people in ten to swallow it myself – and snake stories always are received with prejudice."

"Rather," said Thornhill. "And yet more than one fact I have actually known in my up-country experience would knock out anything I've ever heard, or read in fiction for sheer incredibility

of coincidence."

Elvesdon pricked up his ears.

"I'd like to hear about those," he said.

"Some day perhaps," answered the other carelessly. "Edala dear, get Mr Elvesdon something after his ride. I believe he'd appreciate it, and I know I should – although I haven't had a ride. It's a 'dry' sort of morning. Then I move that we go and sit under the fig-trees, and smoke pipes."

"Carried nem. con.," pronounced Edala.

"Pipes and all – all round I mean, Miss Thornhill?" said Elvesdon.

She looked at him with a smile of half lofty merriment.

"I'm surprised at you, Mr Elvesdon. Disappointed too. Really I am. That's too thin, yet you could not resist it."

"Frankly it is," laughed the culprit. "I'm surprised at myself. Will that do?"

"This time – yes. But – " with a deprecatory shake of the golden head. "Well, let's make a move."

"This is no end of a jolly spot whereon to laze away a restful morning," declared Elvesdon, as snugly disposed in a cane-chair he puffed out contented clouds of smoke.

"Isn't it?" said Thornhill, who was similarly employed. "And it's always cool here, however broiling it may be outside, unless of course there's the hot wind on. That always rakes everything."

Overhead the boughs of the tall fig-trees, with their wealth of broad leaves, made a most effective canopy. Behind was

a high pomegranate hedge, in front young willows fringing a small runnel fed by the dam lower down, where bevies of finks fluttered in and out of their pendulous nests, making the air lively with their cheerful twitter. Glimpsed through an opening here and there the warm sun-rays shot down in golden kiss upon drooping loads of peaches and pears hanging from the fruit trees beyond.

"What's the latest, Mr Elvesdon? Is there any fresh development in this unrest movement?"

It was Edala who spoke. Elvesdon had been contemplating her with a furtive but admiring satisfaction, as she sat there in her low chair, the gold aureole of her head resting back against her clasped hands. There was something in her every movement – her every pose – that fascinated him; yet not an atom of self-consciousness or posing was there about her. And her very attire. The well-fitting blouse of light blue, set off the blue of her eyes, the gold of her hair; the cool white skirt, from which peeped one white shoe – all, he decided, was perfect. At the question he half started.

"The latest?" he echoed. "Well, Miss Thornhill, I don't think there is any 'latest.' Things are much the same as ever, and likely to remain so."

Her eyes were full upon his face, which they seemed to be reading like an open page. She shook her head slightly.

"Ah – you are not going to tell me. You won't say anything before me because I'm a girl. That's what you're thinking. Now

– isn't it?"

Elvesdon, whom we believe we have shown was as far from being a fool as the small minority of people, felt a little disconcerted, and only hoped he was not showing it. As a matter of fact that was exactly what he had been thinking. All his official instincts were dead against discussing official matters in the presence of the other sex; and the question she had asked certainly covered very official matters; far more official – even delicate – at that juncture than his light and ready answer should have led his questioner to believe. Equally, as a matter of fact, she was not deceived by its lightness and readiness for one moment. But before he could frame a second answer Thornhill came to the rescue.

"What should there be of the 'latest,' child?" he said, dropping a sinewy sun-browned hand caressingly upon her long slim, and yet also sun-browned one. "You shouldn't rush Mr Elvesdon in his official capacity you know. It isn't playing the game. Besides, it's a sort of 'day of rest' remember, so we mustn't talk shop."

"Ah-ah-ah! That's all very well," she answered, with a laugh, but not wholly a mirthful one. "If you two were alone together you'd be talking no end of that very kind of shop. I know."

Elvesdon had quite recovered his self-possession. His official susceptibilities were somewhat ruffled by the remark. It was not a question thoughtlessly put by a mere thoughtless girl. This was nothing of the kind, but a woman, with infinite capacity for thought. The question was nothing, but the manner in which

the answer had been taken argued something of petulance, even obstinacy. Now the latter is not an attractive quality in the other sex, he decided, even less, if possible, than in his own.

Then he mentally damned himself for a suspicious and most ill-conditioned curmudgeon, an official prig. This girl with the thoughtful eyes, and quick, bright, intelligent mind, had asked him a mere harmless question – only for information, for she was interested in everything; not out of motives of curiosity – and lo, he had shrunk into his official shell, and had more than half snubbed her; snubbed her by implication at any rate. But – how she puzzled him. He had seen her but once before, but he had thought of her a good many more times than that. She was so totally unlike any other girl he had ever seen in his life.

"Have you been drawing much lately, Miss Thornhill?" he said, interestedly, as though to make up for his former answer. But the remark had just the opposite effect. He was 'talking down to' her now, Edala was thinking. Drawing, painting, singing – those were interests enough for a girl. She must not raise her eyes to weightier and more human matters. But her nature was an intensely self-concentrated one, and self-controlled.

"Oh, yes," she answered easily, and as if the other matter had clean passed from her mind. "I'm thinking of going in for native studies. Would they catch on in Europe should you think, Mr Elvesdon?"

"They'd have the advantage of originality, at any rate," he answered. A merry peal escaped Edala.

"What a good *official* reply," she cried. "Never mind, Mr Elvesdon. I like it. If you had declared they could not do otherwise I don't know what I should have thought of you, if only that never having seen a sample you couldn't possibly know that they were any good at all."

"Why, obviously," rejoined Elvesdon, secretly pleased with himself for having refrained from giving utterance to a second banality. "I'm afraid I'm too old to launch out into paying compliments; and" – he added slyly – "too *official*."

Thornhill chuckled. He, silently emitting puffs of smoke, was watching the battle of wits between the pair and keenly enjoying it. Moreover he rejoiced that Edala should have found a foeman worthy of her steel, one with whom she could sharpen wits. It would relieve the dulness of her life, render her more contented perhaps. Nor did the admiration which would now and then shine out prominently in the eyes of their visitor, when the latter was animated, and therefore off his guard, escape him. So he listened, and smoked complacently, as they branched off from one topic to another, sometimes indulging in a passage of arms, frequently agreeing enthusiastically. Yes, it was a pleasant way of getting through the morning of a "day of rest."

Chapter Eight.
Her "Aerial Throne."

"I know what we must do this afternoon, father," said Edala, when dinner was nearly over. "We'll take Mr Elvesdon to the top of Sipazi."

Elvesdon looked puzzled.

"Do you mean on to the roof, Miss Thornhill?" he said.

The girl went off into another merry peal; the point of the joke being that the farm was so named, after a certain striking mountain which stood opposite, but this their visitor did not know.

"I don't believe you meant that seriously," she said.

"But I did. Why not?"

"When you come to know your own district a little better, Mr Elvesdon," she pronounced with mock severity, "you will know that that flat topped mountain over there beyond the kloof – the one with that splendid red krantz at the top – is called Sipazi-pazi, on account of the glimmer which seems to set it on fire when the sun gets on to it at a certain angle."

"Good name that," he answered, looking at the stately pile with renewed interest. "But then, unfortunately, I have only just come into my 'own district' and haven't quite had time to 'know' everything."

"Well then, this place is named after the mountain," she went on, loftily ignoring the retort. "But the doubled word is too much of a mouthful, so we cut it down, and call both just Sipazi. In fact so do the natives themselves."

"I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of its summit. When shall we start?"

"Oh, not yet. When it's cooler. It doesn't take long to go up, and the sunsets from there are simply indescribable."

Throughout dinner Edala had seemed quite outside of herself. She had descanted volubly on all her favourite topics; had bantered, and argued, and pretended to disagree for the sake of arguing again. Her father was not a little astonished. He had never seen her as animated as this for years – certainly not since she had been grown up. Elvesdon was amusing, and talked well, but Thornhill would never have suspected him of being able to draw Edala out of her shell as he had succeeded in doing.

Dinner was over at last, and an uncommonly good one it had been; so much so as to move Elvesdon to congratulate his host on the excellence of his cook.

"Oh, he's a coolie," answered Thornhill. "He's a great rascal, and was kicked out of one of the hotels in Maritzburg for boozing. I take jolly good care he gets no chance of that here, but he must have been bad if they had to get rid of him, for he *can* cook."

(Coolie: In Natal all natives of India, of whatever occupation or profession, are so called. It is an absurd misnomer of course;

about as much so as to talk about a 'Boer Judge' or a 'Boer engineer' – but it sticks, and always will.)

"By Jingo he can!" assented Elvesdon emphatically. "Those sasaatjes were simply divine."

"Mr Elvesdon clearly appreciates good 'skoff'," said Edala. "Great minds skip together, for so do I."

"I appreciate good everything, I believe," he answered as they got up, "especially good singing. Won't you give us a song, Miss Thornhill? I haven't heard you yet."

"Immediately after dinner? Why, I should positively croak. No, that's no time for vocal exercise. To-night perhaps – you will stay the night, won't you? Well, so long. I am going to take it easy in private life until it gets cooler. Meanwhile I'll leave you to exchange *official* news," she added maliciously, over her shoulder.

"I can't think what you've done to that child, Elvesdon," remarked his host, when they were sitting alone together on the stoep. "I never saw her so lively before, or anything like it; certainly not since she was a little girl. Yet you managed to 'draw' her most effectually."

Elvesdon was human, and at this profuse anointment of his self-esteem he mentally purred. Yet he did not know what the very deuce to answer. He could not, for instance, tell his host that this sort of life must be rather a monotonous one for a girl, and therefore anyone from outside, he supposed would make a welcome change.

"I don't know how it was done," he said, with a deprecatory laugh. "Your daughter evidently has very artistic instincts, Thornhill. I can't say I have, but I've been a bit among people who cut in for that sort of thing, and may have absorbed some of their jargon. I suppose that is what interested her."

"Heard any more about that suspicious stranger I came over to tell you about the other day?" said Thornhill, characteristically changing the subject without any sort of prelude.

"Yes, I have. As you supposed, he's a Zulu from beyond the river, one of Mehlo-ka-zulu's chief men. He's got no business at all in these locations, but you know as well as I do that it's sometimes sound policy to shut one eye. To interfere with him just now would do more harm than good; the tax-collecting time is coming on, and the people want smoothing down, not brushing up."

"That's so," said the other, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "Oh he belongs to Mehlo-ka-zulu does he? M'yes. Mehlo-ka-zulu's a fine fellow but a bit of a firebrand. If anything went wrong here it wouldn't be long before he had a finger in the pie. At least – so *I* predict."

Thus they talked on, airing official matters even as Edala had declared they would. Elvesdon for his part rejoiced at finding a man such as this, right at his very door, so to say; from the well of whose shrewdness and experience he could draw at will. Then they went round to the stables, and soon the slant of the sunbeams told that the heat of the day was passed.

"Well, are we ready for Sipazi? The sun is going off the valley, and we shall have it splendidly cool."

They turned. Edala was looking fresh, and even, for her, rosy, after her nap. Elvesdon almost started. This dash of colour was all that was needed to render the face absolutely a lovely one.

"Look, Mr Elvesdon," she went on. "Now is the time when the sun gets on the big krantz, and makes it gleam like fire. Look."

He did look. The majestic mountain towered up from the sombre moist depths of the now shaded valley below, its slopes striped with tongues of dark bush, shooting up to where they culminated in a sheer wall of cliff, smooth, absolutely perpendicular where not overhanging. Upon this now, the slanting rays of the westering sun were striking at an angle, and the whole face of the gigantic rock wall, scarcely less than three hundred feet sheer, was glowing and sparkling as though it had suddenly burst into flame.

"*Wo! Sipazi-pazi*!" exclaimed Edala, shading her eyes, in laughing imitation of the natives. "Now, haven't we got something to be proud of, Mr Elvesdon? Fancy owning such a fragment of the globe as that – you see, I can't help bragging about it. Now come along and let's get to the top. Here are the horses."

Those useful quadrupeds were being driven in by a mounted boy, and soon the saddles were on them and the three were in the saddles. In about half an hour they had dived down through the broad, shaded valley beneath, now delightfully cool,

and stumbling up a rugged bush path had gained the tree-lined ridge, or saddle, which connected the splendid mountain with the opposite range.

"We'll leave the horses here," said Edala. "You can ride to the top by the other side but it's an awful long way round, nearly an hour, whereas here we can climb up by a cleft in the rock in about a quarter of an hour. Can you climb, Mr Elvesdon?"

"I believe I can do most things when I'm put to it."

"Well then come along," she cried, taking the lead. "There are such jolly maidenhair ferns, too, all the way up."

"I think I'll wait for you here and smoke a pipe," said Thornhill.

"No, no, father. You must come up too."

"Well, I will then. By the way Elvesdon. Take care how you move about when you're on top. There are some rock crevices there, hidden away in the long grass, and if you got into some of them we should have to send round to about ten farms before we could get hold of enough combined length of reims to get you out, even if we could then."

"By Jove, are there?"

"Never mind. I'll take care of you," called Edala. "Come on after me."

And in her lithe agility she drew herself up from rock to rock, now poising for a moment on one foot, then springing higher to another point of vantage.

The place they were now in was a very steep, chimney-

like rock gully, such as would be known in Alpine parlance as a 'couloir.' To those of weak nerve or dizzily inclined heads it would have looked formidable enough, for, besides its own height, from a little way up it seemed as if it overhung the whole depth of the valley. Above, too, craggy jutting rocks, shooting forth savagely against the sky, looked as though about to fall on and overwhelm the invaders of their mountain solitude. In hard fact it was safe enough, being indeed a gigantic natural stairway thickly coated with oozy moss, while the sides were festooned with masses of beautiful maidenhair fern.

"Here we are at last," cried Edala as they gained the summit. "Confess. Doesn't this repay any amount of trouble?"

"I should think it did," answered Elvesdon, "or would, rather; for getting here has been no trouble at all."

It was as though they were poised in mid-air. Beneath, the homestead lay, like a group of tiny toy buildings. Around, everywhere billowing masses of mountain, dark recesses of forest grown kloofs, gleaming cliffs now catching the westering sun's parting kiss; the roll of the mimosa strewn plains seeming absolutely flat from this altitude. Here and there too the circle of a native kraal surmounted by its inevitable thread of blue smoke, and far-away in the distance the dim peaks of the Drakensberg range.

"Come and look over the Sipazi krantz," said Edala, at length, when the awed silence with which this stupendous panorama could not fail to strike a newcomer, had been broken.

"Look over it!" echoed Elvesdon. "Why it seems to me that the ground slopes down to its brink at a pretty steep angle. You can't lie flat there. You'd tilt over head first."

"You'll see," was the answer. And the speaker proceeded to climb down, face to the mountain, a very steep grass slope indeed, so steep as to be almost a precipice. Tough roots, however, grew here, strong enough to afford a securer hold than might have been expected; then where the slope ended she stopped. A stunted tree grew here on the very edge of the abyss, and horizontally over the same, shooting first slightly downwards and then up, the bend of its trunk forming a seat. And into this seat did the girl by a deft movement, and without the slightest hesitation, quickly glide.

"This is how you look over the Sipazi krantz," she laughed up at him, her blue eyes dancing. "It's the only way in which you can look over it at all. *What* a drop!"

Holding on to the bough above her shoulder with one hand she sat there, gazing down, her feet dangling over the ghastly abyss. Elvesdon seemed to feel his blood freeze within him, and his knees knocked together. Even the tree shook and trembled beneath her weight.

"Isn't it rather dangerous?" he called out, striving to master the tremulous anxiety of his voice. "The tree might give way, you know."

"It never has yet, which of course is not to say it never will – as you were about to remark," she laughed back. "Well, I'll come

up."

"Yes do," he said, bending over the brow of the grass-roll as though to help her. But she needed no help. She sprang up, lithe, agile as a cat, and in a moment was beside him.

"Would you like to try it?" she said eagerly, as if the feat was the most ordinary one in the world. "Would you like to look over Sipazi? I can tell you it's worth it. It feels like flying. But don't if you think you can't," she added, quick to take in the not to be concealed momentary hesitation.

That challenge settled it; yet the words were not meant as a challenge at all, but as sheer practical warning. She would not have thought an atom the worse of him if he had laughingly declined, but Elvesdon did not know this. Was he going to shrink from a feat which a girl could perform – had often performed? Not he.

"Yes. I think I should," he answered. "I should like to be able to brag of having looked over Sipazi."

Yet as he let himself down over the grass and root-hung brow which led to the actual brink, he owned to himself that by no possibility could he ever tell a bigger he, and further, that at that moment he would cheerfully have forfeited a year's pay to find himself standing safe and sound on the summit again. Well, he would not look down. He would get through the performance as quickly as possible, and return.

He was out on the tree, grasping the branch her hand had held on by. Yet why did the confounded trunk tremble and sway so,

and – horror! it seemed to be giving way, actually sinking under him. The ghastly thought darted through his mind that there was all the difference in their weight – that that which would carry her would break down with him. His nerve was tottering. His face grew icy cold, and the hand which held the bough trembled violently. He was perched over that awful height even as she had been. He was not unused to heights, but to be suspended thus between heaven and earth in mid-air – no, to that he was not used. Beneath him the face of the great rock wall sloped away *inwards*. Anyone falling from here would strike the ground about thirty feet from its base. All the world seemed going round with him – not even the thought that Edala had just done the same thing availed to pull him together. He must go – must hurl himself off and end this agony of nightmare – when —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.