

Mitford Bertram

In the Whirl of the Rising



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Содержание

Prologue	5
Chapter One.	9
Chapter Two.	13
Chapter Three.	17
Chapter Four.	21
Chapter Five.	25
Chapter Six.	29
Chapter Seven.	33
Chapter Eight.	37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

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Prologue

“You coward!”

The word cut crisply and sharp through the clear frosty air, lashing and keen as the wind that stirred the crystal-spangled pines, and the musical ring of skate-blades upon the ice-bound surface of the mere. She who uttered it stood, her flower-like face and deep blue eyes all a-quiver with contemptuous disgust. He to whom it was addressed, started, blenched ever so slightly, his countenance immediately resuming its mask of bronze impassibility. Those who heard it echoed it, secretly or in deep and angry mutter, the while proceeding with their task – to wit, the restoring of animation to a very nearly drowned human being, rescued, at infinite risk, from the treacherous spring hole which had let him through the surface of the ice.

“Say it again,” was the answer. “It is such a kind and pleasant thing to hear, coming from you. So just, too. Do say it again.”

“I will say it again,” went on the first speaker; and, exasperated by the bitter sneering tone of the other, her voice rang out high and clear, “You coward!”

Piers Lamont’s dark face took on a change, but it expressed a sneer as certain retrospective pictures rose before his mental gaze. Such indeed, in his case, drew the sting of about the most stinging epithet that lips can frame; yet, remembering that the lips then framing it were those of the girl with whom he was passionately in love, and to whom he had recently become engaged, it seemed to hurt.

“Say something. Oh, do say something!” she went on, speaking quickly. “The boy might have been drowned, and very nearly was, while you stood, with your hands in your pockets, looking on.”

“If your people see fit to throw open the mere to the rabble, the rabble must take care of itself,” he answered. “I daresay I can risk my life, with an adequate motive. That – isn’t one.”

The words, audible to many of the bystanders, the contemptuous tone, and nod of the head in the direction of the ever-increasing group on the bank, deepened the prevailing indignation. Angry murmurs arose, and some “booing.” Perhaps the presence of the Squire’s daughter alone restrained this demonstration from taking a more active form of hostility; or it may even have been a something in the hard, bronzed face and firm build of the man who had just been publicly dubbed “coward.”

“For shame!” hotly retorted the girl. “I have no wish to talk to you any more, or ever again. Please go.”

He made no reply. Lifting his hat ceremoniously he turned away. A few yards’ glide brought him to the bank. He sat down, deliberately removed his skates, lit a cigar, then started upon his way; the no-longer restrained jeers which followed him falling upon his ears with no other effect than to cause him to congratulate himself upon having given others the opportunity of performing the feat from which he had refrained.

The subject of all this disturbance was showing signs of restoration to life and consciousness. Seen in the midst of the gaping – and for the most part useless – crowd which hemmed him in, he was an urchin of about thirteen or fourteen, with a debased type of countenance wherein the characteristics of the worst phase of guttersnipe – low cunning, predatoriness, boundless impudence, and aggressive brutality – showed more than incipient. Such a countenance was it, indeed, as to suggest that the rescue of its owner from a watery death went far to prove the truth of a certain homely proverb relating to hanging and drowning. And now, gazing upon it, Violet Courtland was conscious of an unpleasant truth in those last words spoken by her *fiancé*. She was forced to own to herself that the saving of this life assuredly was not worth the risking of his. Yet she had implored him to

do something towards the rescue, and he had done nothing. He had replied that there was nothing to be done; had stood, calmly looking on while others had risked their lives, he fearing for his. Yes, *fearing*. It looked like that.

And yet – and yet! She knew but little of his past, except what he had told her. She had taken him on trust. He had led something of an adventurous life in wild parts of Africa. Two or three times, under pressure, he had told of an adventurous incident, wherein assuredly he himself had not played a coward's part. Yet the recollection so far from clearing him in her estimation produced a contrary effect, and her lips curled as she decided that he had merely been bragging on these occasions; that if the events had happened at all they must have happened to somebody else. For, when all was said and done, he had shown himself a coward in her sight. Her hastily formed judgment stood – if anything – stronger than before. And – she was engaged to marry a coward!

With a sad sinking of heart she left the spot, and, avoiding all escort or companionship, took her way homeward alone. The short winter afternoon was waning, and a red afterglow was already fast fading into the grey of dusk. Against it the chimney stacks of Courtland Hall stood silhouetted blackly, while farther down, among the leafless and frost spangled tree-tops, the old church-tower stood square and massive.

It was Christmas Eve, and now the bells in the tower rang out in sudden and tuneful chime, flinging their merry peal far and wide over leafless woodland and frozen meadow. They blended, too, with the ring of belated blades on the ice-bound mere behind, and the sound of voices mellowed by distance. To this girl, now hurrying along the field path, her little skates dangling from her wrist, but for the events of the last half-hour how sweet and hallowed and homelike it would all have been; glorified, too, by the presence of *one*! Now, anger, disgust, contempt filled her mind; and her heart was aching and sore with the void of an ideal cast out.

One was there as she struck into the garden path leading up to the terrace. He was pacing up and down smoking a cigar.

"Well?" he said, turning suddenly upon her. "Well, and have you had time to reconsider your very hastily expressed opinion?"

"It was not hastily expressed. It was deliberate," she replied quickly. "I have no words for a coward. I said that before."

"Yes, you said that before – for the amusement of a mob of grunting yokels, and an odd social equal or two. And now you repeat it. Very well. Think what you please. It is utterly immaterial to me now and henceforward. I will not even say good-bye."

He walked away from her in the other direction, while she passed on. A half impulse was upon her to linger, to offer him an opportunity of explanation. Somehow there was that about his personality which seemed to belie her judgment upon him. But pride, perversity, superficiality of the deductive faculty, triumphed. She passed on without a word.

The hour was dark for Piers Lamont – dark indeed. He was a hardened man, and a strong-willed one, but now he needed all his hardness, all his strength. He had loved this girl passionately and almost at first sight, secretly and at a distance for some time before accident had brought about their engagement, now a matter of three months' duration. And she had returned his love in full, or had seemed to, until this disastrous afternoon. And now his sense of justice was cruelly outraged, and that he felt as if he could never forgive. Moreover, his was one of those natures to which an occurrence of this kind was like chipping a piece out of a perfect and valuable vase or statue. The piece may be restored, but, however skilfully such be done, the rift remains, the object is no longer perfect. It is probable that at that moment he felt more bitterly towards Violet than she did towards him, which is saying a great deal. He had been rudely thrown out of his fool's paradise, and with grim resolution he must accept the position and live down the loss. But the flower-like face, and the deep blue eyes which had brimmed up at him with love, and the soft, wavy brown hair which had pillowed against

his breast in restful trust – could he ever tear the recollection from his mind? Pest take those jangling Christmas bells though, cleaving the night with their mockery of peace and good-will!

“Here, Violet. What the dickens is the meaning of this?” said her father, an hour or two later, as he met her going upstairs to dress for dinner. “Here’s Lamont cleared at a moment’s notice, without the civility even to say good-bye. Leaves this,” – holding out an open letter – “saying he’s been called away on urgent business – a qualified lie you know, because no one does business on Christmas Day, and it’s nearly that now – and won’t be able to return; may have to go abroad immediately; and all the stock balderdash men write under the circumstances; though how they imagine anybody is going to be such an idiot as to believe them, I can’t make out. Now, *you* are at the back of all this. Had a row?”

“Oh, I don’t care to talk about it,” she said, with a movement as though to pass on.

“But you must care to talk about it, my dear girl; at any rate for my satisfaction. You had to consult me, didn’t you, in order to bring about this engagement? and now if you’ve thrown the man over – and it looks deucedly as if you had – I’ve a right to know why. Here – come in here.”

Squire Courtland was by no means of the type usually described as “one of the old school,” except in so far that he was very much master in his own house. For the rest, he prided himself on being exceedingly up-to-date – and his estimate of woman was almost savage in its cynicism. Between himself and Violet there was an utter lack of sympathy; resulting, now that she was grown up, in an occasional and very unpleasant passage of arms.

“If I’ve thrown the man over!” quoted Violet angrily, when they were alone in her father’s own private ‘den,’ “of course you are sure to take his part.”

“I must know what ‘his part’ is before taking it or not. You women always expect us to hang a man first and try him afterwards; or rather to hang him on your sweet evidence alone, and not try him at all.”

“Oh, father, please don’t talk to me in that horrid tone,” restraining with vast effort the paroxysm of sobbing which threatened, and which she knew would only irritate him. “I am not feeling so extra happy, I can tell you.”

“Well, get it over then. What has Lamont done?”

“I can’t marry a coward.”

“Eh? A coward? Lamont? Have you taken leave of your senses, girl?”

“Well, listen. You shall hear,” she said crisply. And then she gave him an account of the whole affair.

“Is that all?” he said when she had done.

“All?”

“Yes. All?”

“Yes, it is. I don’t see what more there could be. I urged him to try and save the boy, and he refused. Refused!”

“And, by the Lord, he was right!” cried the Squire. “The answer he gave you was absolutely the right one, my child. If it had been yourself you’d have seen how he’d have gone in, but for a man of Lamont’s strong common-sense to go and throw away his life for a gallows’ brat that has only been fished out of the mere to be hanged later on in due course – why, I’m glad he’s justified the good opinion I had of him.”

“Then, father, you think he was justified in refusing to save life under any circumstances?” said Violet, very white and hard. There was no fear of her breaking down now. The fact of her father siding so entirely with her cast-off lover was as a tonic. It hardened and braced her.

“Certainly I do. He gave you the right answer, and on your own showing you insulted him – taking advantage of being a woman – several times over, for the fun of a squalid rabble that I am fool enough to allow to come and disport themselves on my property; but I’ll have them all cleared off tomorrow. Coward, indeed! Lamont a coward! No – no. That won’t do. I know men too well for that.”

“Then he was a brute instead,” retorted Violet, lashing herself into additional anger, as a dismal misgiving assailed her that she might have made a hideous and lifelong error of judgment. “A coldblooded, calculating brute, and that’s just as bad.”

“I don’t fancy you’ll get many to agree with you as to the last, my dear. Any man would rather be a brute than a coward,” said the Squire sneeringly. “And every man is a brute in the eyes of a woman if he doesn’t lie down flat and let her waltz over him, or fetch and carry, and cringe like a well-trained water-spaniel. Well, that’s neither here nor there. You’ve been engaged to a strong, level-headed, sensible man – one of the most sensible I’ve ever known – and you’ve publicly insulted him and thrown him over for no adequate cause whatever, I suppose if ever I see him again I shall have to apologise to him for the way he’s been treated.”

Violet could hardly contain herself throughout this peroration.

“Apologise to him?” she flashed. “Good Heavens! if the man went down on his knees to me, after what has happened, I wouldn’t look at him.”

“Well, you’re not likely to get the chance. Lamont is no such imbecile as to embark on any silliness of that kind. You’ve had such a chance as you’ll never get again, and you’ll live to regret it, mark me.”

The girl went from her father’s presence in a whirlwind of passion, but – it was mixed. Inwardly she raged against him for not sympathising with – not applauding her action. He had thrown another light upon the matter; hard, cynical, even brutal, but – still another light. And the sting lay in his last words. She would live to regret it, he had said. Why, she regretted it already.

Chapter One.

The Mopani Forest

The man could hardly drag one step behind the other. He could hardly drag by the bridle the tottering horse, of which the same held good.

His brain was giddy and his eyes wearied with the unvarying vista on every hand, the straight stems of the mopani forest, enclosing him; a still and ghastly wilderness devoid of bird or animal life. He stumbled forward, his lips blue and cracked, his tongue swollen, his throat on fire; and in his mind was blank and utter despair, for he knew that he was in the heart of a waterless tract, extending for about a hundred miles, and for over forty hours no drop of moisture of any sort had passed his lips. Forty hours of wandering in the driest, most thirst-inspiring region in the world!

He had made a bad start. There had been festivities at Fort Pagadi the night before, to celebrate the Jameson Raid and drink the health of its leaders. In these he had participated to the full – very much to the full. He had started at daybreak with a native guide, a headache, and a thirst which a brace of long and early brandies-and-sodas had failed entirely to quench. He had started, too, with another concomitant incidental to these latter – a very bad temper, to wit; wherefore, the native guide proving irritatingly dull of comprehension, he leaned from the saddle and cuffed him; which proceeding that aboriginal resented by decamping on the first opportunity.

Then he should have gone back, but he did not. He took short cuts instead. This was the more idiotic as he was rather new to the country, to this actual section of it entirely so. In short, it is hardly surprising that in the logical result he should have found himself lost – irretrievably ‘turned round’; and now, after two days and a night of wandering to and fro, and round and round, in futile, frantic efforts to extricate himself from that fatal net, here he was hardly able to drag himself or his horse four hundred yards farther, the nearest water being anything between thirty and fifty miles away.

The scant shade of the mopani foliage afforded little protection from the sun, and even if it had, the oven-like atmosphere engendered by the burnt, cracked soil would have neutralised such. He had tried climbing trees in order to try and get some sort of bearings. As well might a swimmer in mid-ocean rise to the crest of a wave, hoping to descry a landmark. The smooth, regular expanse of bluish-grey leafage stretched away unbroken, in whatever direction he might turn his eager despairing gaze; and he had got stung by ants, and had wasted a deal of much needed vitality in the effort. That was all, and now he had not even the strength to climb half a tree if his life had depended upon it. Even an unlooked-for stumble on the part of the horse he was leading dragged him flat on his back, jerking at the same time the bridle from his hand.

“Come here, you infernal loathly brute!” he snarled, making an effort to recover the rein. But for some reason, instinct perhaps, the horse backed away, just keeping beyond reach.

He glared at the animal with hatred, not altogether unreasonable. For when he had been travelling about four hours, and was uneasily beginning to realise that he was lost, he had unslung his vulcanite water-bottle – which nobody travelling up-country should ever be without – and had placed it on the ground while off-saddling. But something had startled the stupid brute, which in its blundering, foolish plunges had put its foot clean through that indispensable receptacle, of course shattering it like an eggshell, and spilling every drop of the contents on the thirsty, sucking soil. He had intended, when the worst came to the worst, to kill the animal, and assuage his torturing thirst with the draught of its blood; and the worst *had* come to the worst.

Some instinct must have lurked within that stupid brain, for now neither cursing nor coaxing, tried alternately, would induce the horse to come within reach. Exhausted as it was, it would still slue round, jerking the bridle away with every attempt to seize it. Once, in desperation, he seized

a stirrup leather, hoping to gain the saddle that way, and recover the bridle-rein, only to result in a nasty fall against a mopani stem.

Hideous and thick were the curses which oozed from the swollen lips of the despairing man, as he saw even this last chance of life – loathsome, revolting as it was – reft from him. He had no firearms; his six-shooter he had left for repairs at Fort Pagadi, and not being able to find the smith at the early hour of his start, with characteristic impatience he had come on without it: otherwise the difficulty would have been settled then and there. But as he resumed his stumbling way, the horse, apparently appreciating human companionship in that wild solitude, continued to follow him, though persistently defying all effort to secure it.

He glanced upward. The sun was throwing long rays now along the tree-tops. Another night would soon be here, bringing with it, however, no abatement of heat and thirst and torment – Ah! h!

The deep-drawn, raucous sigh that escaped the man can hardly be conveyed. In front the trees were thinning. There was light beyond. The road, of course! He had reached the road again, which he should never have left. There it would be hard but that some traveller or transport rider should find him, even if he had not the strength to drag himself on to the nearest human habitation.

With renewed strength, which he thought had left him for ever, he hurried forward. The line of light grew lighter. The trees ended. No road was this, but a stony dry *shuit*. It would run a torrent after a thunderstorm, but this was not the time of thunderstorms, wherefore now it was as dry as the hard rock that constituted its bed. The wretched wanderer uttered an exclamation that was half groan, half curse, but was expressive of the very acme of human despair.

He turned again to try and coax his horse within catching distance. But this time the animal threw up its head, snorted, and, with an energy he had not thought it still to possess, turned and trotted off into the depths of the mopani, its head in the air, and the bridle-rein swinging clear of the ground. With another awful curse the man fell forward on the baking earth, and lay, half in, half out of the line of trees which ended at the *shuit*.

He lay motionless. The sun was off the opening, fortunately for him, or its terrible focussed rays, falling on the back of his neck, would have ended his allotted time then and there. But – what was this? On the line of his track, moving towards him, shadows were stealing – two of them.

Shadows? They were like such, as they flitted from tree to tree – two evil-looking Makalaka – with their glistening bodies naked save for a skin *mútya* and a collar of wooden beads, with their smooth, shaven heads and broad noses and glistening eyeballs. And now each gripped more tightly an assegai and a native axe, as nearer and nearer, like gliding demons, they stole noiselessly upon the prostrate and exhausted white man.

The latter had not been so completely alone as he had supposed. Yard upon yard, mile upon mile, his footsteps had been dogged by these human – or hardly human – sleuth-hounds. Their ghoul-like exultation when they had discovered another lost white man, within what was to them as its web is to a spider, had known no bounds. *Another!* Yes. For more than one traveller had disappeared already within that trackless thirst-belt, never to be heard of again either in life or death.

To these, and such as these, this unfathomable tract of thirst-land was nothing. To the whisky-and-soda drinking Englishman, with his artificial wants, and general lack of resource and utter deficiency in the bump of locality, it was, as in the case of the one lying here, a tomb. To the lithe, serpentine savage, whose draught of water, and mess of coarse *impupu*, or mealie porridge – when he could get it – it was a joke. These two had learned this, and had turned it to account, even as they were about to turn it to account again. They had been on the spoor of the wanderer from the very first, with hardly more to eat or drink than he. But then, they had not started after spending a night toasting the Jameson Raid.

Now they looked at each other, and there was a complete inventory in each devilish glance. Summed up, it read: A suit of clothes; item a shirt, boots; item a revolver and a knife – which he was too exhausted and which they would not give him time to use; item a watch and chain – tradeable

at some distant time and place; certainly some money – available immediately. The horse, too. They need not trouble about it now. They would find it easily enough afterwards, and then what a feast! Of a truth their Snake was favourable to them again!

There lay the victim – there lay the prey. Gliding like evil wood-demons from the edge of the trees they were over him now. One more glance exchanged. Each had got his rôle. The doomed man lay still, with eyes closed, and a churn of froth at the corners of the swollen lips. One slowly raised his axe to bring it down on the skull. The other gripped aloft his assegai. Both could not miss, and it was as well to provide against contingencies – when —

The fiend with the axe leapt high in the air, falling backward, then leaping half up again and performing a series of wondrous gyrations, – this simultaneously with a sharp crack from the cover opposite, on the farther side of the *sluit*, – shot fair and square and neatly through the head. The fiend with the assegai knew better than to waste time unprofitably by completing his stroke. He whirled round as on a pivot, darting within the friendly trees with the rapidity of a startled snake. But futilely. For one infinitesimal fraction of a second, Time decreed that that gliding, dark body should be in line with a certain slit-like vista in the mopani stems, and – Crack! – again. The second miscreant dropped, like a walking-stick you let fall on the pavement, and lay face downwards, arms outspread, motionless as his intended victim.

Then there was silence again in the mopani forest, where lay three motionless human bodies; dead silence, for – hours, it seemed. No; it was only minutes.

From among the trees lining the opposite side of the dry *sluit*, out of the burnt-up grass there now arose the figure of a man – a white man. He carried a .303 magazine rifle in his left hand, and a revolver of business-like size was slung round him in a holster. He was rather tall than not, and loose hung; but from the moment he put down his foot to step forth from his cover, you could discern a sinewy elasticity of frame which it would take any two men's share of fatigue to overcome. His face was peculiar. Grey-bearded and high-nosed, it conveyed the impression of chronic whimsicality, especially just now, puckered with the chuckle which was convulsing its owner. But there was a steely clearness in the blue eyes, glancing straight from under the broad hat-brim, that you would rather not face looking at you from behind the sights of a rifle.

This curiously effective specimen of a guardian angel lounged across to the fellow-countryman whose life he had saved, and gazed down at the latter.

"Near go!" he ruminated. "Near a one as this Johnny Raw 'll ever have again. Why? 'Cause it couldn't be nearer. Good-looking feller whoever he is, but – he needn't know too much. Heave up – ho!" And laying hold of the heels of the savage he had first shot, he proceeded to haul the corpse of that assassin, to the accompaniment of very nautical-sounding cries, to a sufficient distance as to be invisible to the intended victim when the latter should wake to consciousness.

"No; he needn't know too much," he repeated, returning to the sufferer. "Now then, mister, wake up and have a pull at this."

"This" being a substantial water-bottle. Presumably there was something magnetic in its inviting gurgle – for the hitherto unconscious man opened his eyes, stared, then half leaping up made a wild snatch at the bottle.

"*Gahle—gahle!*" said the other, "and that means 'no hurry.' A little at a time is what'll meet your case. Here you are;" and he filled him out a small measure. But so tremulous were the sufferer's hands with eagerness and weakness combined that he spilled half its contents.

"That won't do, sonny. This stuffs too valuable till we get clear of the mopani belt. Here – give it to me." And he held it to the other's lips.

"More – more."

"No; that's enough to go on with. Well – a little more, then. Now, pull yourself together and come along with me. What? Starving? Oh ay. Well, chew at this chunk o' biscuit. It ain't soft tack

but it's better than nothing, and I'm too old a sailor – prospector, I mean – to be navigating these seas without a shot in the locker.”

The other munched fiercely at the brown, uninviting bit of biscuit. His succourer looked approvingly on.

“That’s right,” he said. “Now we’ll serve out some more water. Then I’ll put you on my horse – he’s anchored t’other side of the *sluit*– and we’ll shape a course for my donkey-carts. They’re out-spanned on the road.”

“The road? Are we near the road?” stammered the other.

“Mile or so. But keep your tongue down, sonny, until we get there. You don’t want to talk a lot till you’ve had some proper skoff.”

Chapter Two.

A Pioneer Farm

The walls of the room were hung with dark blue “limbo,” which gave an impression of refreshing coolness and restful, subdued light, in grateful contrast to the hot, white glare outside. The furniture of the room was pre-eminently of the useful order, consisting of a plain ‘stinkwood’ table, three or four ditto chairs much the worse for wear, a sideboard consisting of two packing-cases knocked into one, a bookshelf, and a camp bedstead whereon now reclined the, at present, sole occupant and – in general – proprietor of the place.

He had been indulging in a siesta, which had run into hours. The naturally dark face was tanned a rich brown by the up-country sun and winds, and it was just the face that the up-country life would go to strengthen – with its firm eyes and square, determined chin. As now seen it was clear that the thoughts of its owner were not of a pleasant nature. Briefly, they might be summed up somewhat in this wise —

“Is that foolery destined to haunt me for the remainder of my natural life? I shut it down and turned my back on it more than a year ago – and yet, and yet, I can’t even take an afternoon snooze without dreaming all that idiocy over again.”

The jaded lassitude usually attendant on immediately awakening out of a day sleep to those who seldom indulge in one was upon this man. Moreover, the last vision of his dreams had been one of a lovely, reproachful face – a recollection of a bitter parting and love turned to hate; a rehearsal of the whole heart-breaking experience, reproduced with that vivid reality which a dream can infuse. All of which hardly conduced to a cheerful frame of mind.

“Wonder when Peters will be back,” ran on his reflections. “He said this evening. Peters is a most effectual antidote to the blues, and – By the way, there’s nothing much for skoff. I’d better take a look round ‘the poultry yard.’”

With a yawn he rose from the couch and stood upright. His erect, firmly-knit form was well set off by the prevailing costume of the country, namely, a light shirt, breeches and gaiters, and leather belt. He flung on the usual broad-brimmed cowboy hat, and, taking a gun and a handful of cartridges, stood in the doorway for a moment, looking forth.

The glare of the hot hours was already toning off into that exquisitely soft and mellow light, where afternoon merges into the African evening. He looked forth upon an expanse of park-like country, rolling away from his very door. Three or four great granite kopjes rose farther on, and, beyond these, a dark line, extending as far as the eye could reach, marked the margin of a vast forest tract. Taking a few steps forward he turned. Here an entirely different scene was before his gaze. Behind the rude house of plaster and thatch, from which he had just emerged, was a large circular enclosure, stockaded with mopani poles and thorny mimosa boughs, while another and smaller stockade, similarly constructed, enclosed several conical huts. He had laughed at his native servants when they had urged the necessity of building such a stockade. Lions? Hyenas? Why, no wild animal would venture inside a hut. Look at his own house. It was not stockaded. To which they had replied in true native fashion that that might be so. The *Inkosi* was a very great and powerful white man, but they were only poor helpless black men; and, moreover, that wild animals *had* been known to take people out of their huts. So he had laughed and let them have their way.

Such was Piers Lamont’s pioneer farm in Matabeleland. It had been granted him by reason of his services during the war of occupation in ’93, and he had sold it – for a song – when he wanted a run home. He had bought it back – very much on the same terms – a few months previously, on his return to the old up-country life.

“Ho, Zingela!” he called.

“*Nkose!*” and a young native appeared from the enclosure containing the conical huts. He was tall and slim, and straight as a dart, and had a pleasing face.

“Come with me,” said Lamont, speaking the Sindabele very fairly; “I am going down to the river bank to collect a few birds for the pot. You shall carry them.”

“*Nkose!*” sung out the boy with great heartiness.

The South African native is a born sportsman, and if there is a service congenial to him it is the participation, even vicariously, in any form of sport.

They strolled leisurely down among the tree-stems by the river bank. The francolin, or bush pheasant, whirred up out of the tall tambuti grass one or two at a time. Crack! crack! went the gun, and in less than half an hour Lamont’s cartridges, of which he had taken ten, were exhausted, and Zingela was carrying nine birds as they retraced their steps homeward.

“Cook them all, Zingela. The other *Inkosi* will be home to-night, and will be hungry.” Then as the boy, with a murmur of assent, withdrew, Lamont dropped into one of the cane chairs on the low stoep, beneath the projecting verandah of thatch, and lit a pipe.

The sun sank lower and lower, and the evening light became more golden and entrancing. It was an hour and a scene to promote meditation, retrospection, and he did not want retrospection. Still it was there. Like most things we don’t want, it would intrude. The influence of his recent dream was still upon him, and from it there was no getting away.

Rather more than a year ago, and Violet Courtland had indignantly, and in public, branded him as a coward. He had striven to put the incident from his mind and her and her recollection from his life – and had mostly succeeded. There were times when her recollection would be forced back upon him, though such occasions were becoming rarer and their effect fainter. Every occasion of the kind had been succeeded by a fierce reaction of vindictive rancour against one who could so have misjudged him, and so would this. Yet it was more vivid, more saturating, than any of them.

“Not if she went on her knees to me would I ever forgive her that one thing,” he would say fiercely to himself on the occasion of such reactions, thus unconsciously paraphrasing the very words that had been said about him, more than a year ago, and upwards of seven thousand miles away. And there would occur to him the idea that life here was too easy, too stagnant. Yet he had not had things all his own way. The dread scourge which had swept steadily down from the north had not spared him; that rinderpest which had decimated his neighbours’ cattle, as well as that of the natives, had decimated – was still decimating – his own. Even this, however, could not avail to afford him the anxiety which might constitute the one nail destined to drive out the other; for its ravages, however much they might spell loss, and serious loss, could never to him spell utter ruin, as was the case with some others.

Now a sound of distant lowing, and the occasional clear shout of the driver, told that his own herd was being driven in for the night; and then the calves which had already been brought in woke up, in responsive bellow, to greet the approaching herd. Lamont rose and went round to the kraal. Here was a possible source of anxiety, and narrowly and eagerly did he scan the animals as they passed him, lest haply he might discern symptoms of the dread pestilence. But none appeared, nor did a closer investigation as he moved about within the kraal show further cause for anxiety. So preoccupied was he with this that he entirely failed to notice the approach of a horseman in the growing dusk, until the circumstance was brought to his notice by the sharp crack of a whip and a cheery hail.

“Evenin’, Lamont.”

“Peters, by George! Well, I said you’d be back to-night. You’re as punctual as a jolly clock, old man.”

The speaker was outside the gate now, and the two men exchanged a cordial hand-grip.

“Jolly glad you are back too,” he went on. “I’ve got on a fit of holy blues to-night.”

“Oh well, then, it’s a good job I’ve brought along a chum. He’ll help liven you.”

“A chum? Where is he?”

“With the carts. They’re about at the three-mile *draai* now. His horse knocked out. This was the way of it,” went on Peters, who, having off-saddled his own mount and handed it over to a boy, led the way to the house. “You know Fuliya’s bend on the Pagadi road. No, you don’t? Well, no matter. Here’s luck, old man.”

Down went two long tumblers of whisky-and-selzogene.

“We’ll have another when the other chap turns up,” said Peters, with a jolly laugh. “Well, as I was saying, just before I got to that bend I saw two ugly Makalakas cross the road.”

“Nothing wonderful in that. Most likely they only wanted to get to the other side,” said Lamont slily.

“Eh? Oh, I see. Well they did, of course. They dived into the mopani. But, you know, they gave me the idea of being up to some devilment. They didn’t see me neither, and they had axes and assegais, but of course it was none of my business if they were going to stick or hack some other nigger, so I just rode on. A mile or so farther, just the other side of a dry *sluit*, I saw a brand-new bush-buck spoor leading into the mopani. I could do with some fresh meat just then – dead sick of ‘bully’ – so started to see if I could get near enough to him with the .303. Well I didn’t. I saw something else that drove the other clean out of my head. On the opposite side of the *sluit* from me a man staggered out from the trees – a white man – and fell. ‘That’s what those two devils were up to, was it,’ I thought. They’d assegaied him from behind, and would be here in a minute to collect the plunder. You know, Lamont, more than one white man has disappeared in that mopani belt, but it’s always been put down to thirst.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Well, I just dropped down in the tambuti grass, and wormed forward to where I could see over a bit o’ rock. Then I drew a careful bead on the exact spot where the nigger would stand to finish off the chap, and – by the Lord! – there the nigger was, with an axe all ready in his fist. In about a second he had skipped his own length in the air, and was prancing about on the ground. He’d got it through the head, you see.”

“Good! Did the other show up?”

“Didn’t he? They showed up together. He cleared. But he was too late. I got him too.”

“Good old right and left! Well done, Peters! And the white man – who was he, and was he badly damaged?”

“He wasn’t damaged at all. But he’d have been dead of thirst before night, even if the niggers had never sighted him. He’s a Johnny Raw, and he’d been drawing sort of figures of eight all about that mopani patch for the last forty-eight hours. I didn’t tell him there’d been any shootin’, or any niggers at all, and ain’t going to. That sounds like the carts,” as the noise of wheels and whip cracking drew nearer and nearer. “Yes; it is.”

As the carts drew up, Lamont went back into the room for a moment to get something he had left. When he turned, a tall figure stood in the doorway framed against the darkness beyond.

“Lamont – isn’t it?”

This was a fairly familiar method of address from a perfect stranger, even in a land of generally prevailing free-and-easiness, and Lamont stiffened.

“Let me see, I know the voice,” he said, staring at the new arrival. “But – ”

The other laughed.

“Thought I’d give you a little surprise,” he said. “I’m Ancram. We were staying at Courtland together, don’t you remember?”

“Oh yes – perfectly. Come in. I didn’t recognise you at first because – er – ”

“I haven’t had a shave for a week,” supplemented the other, with an easy laugh. “Well, we can put that right now.”

“It did make a difference certainly. Well, and how are you, Ancram?”

“Hallo!” sung out Peters, appearing at the door. “Brought off your surprise yet, Ancram? He said I wasn’t to give away his name, Lamont, because he wanted to spring a surprise on you. Ha-ha!”

Chapter Three.

Taking in the Stranger

Decidedly Lamont had had a surprise sprung upon him. Whether it was an agreeable one or not is another matter.

His greeting of the new arrival was polite rather than cordial; even pleasant, but not spontaneous. There was a vast difference in his handshake here to that wherewith he had welcomed Peters, for instance; nor did he use the formula, "Glad to see you." Ancram noticed this, and so did Peters.

Lamont was nothing if not downright, and would never say a thing he did not mean. Peters knew this, wherefore he began to feel mightily uncomfortable, and wished he hadn't brought the stranger along. But then Ancram had asked him point-blank if he could tell him where to find Lamont, who was a friend of his, and whom he had heard was settled somewhere in these parts; and he had received the question with a great roar of laughter, replying that no man in all Rhodesia was more fully qualified to give him that very information. But if this outsider's presence was going to prove a thorn in the side of his friend, – rather than do anything to annoy whom he would have cut off his right hand, – why, the sooner they scooted him off the better, decided Peters. Aloud he said —

"Here's luck, Ancram. What would you have given for this jolly long drink when you were strolling about in the *doorstland*, hey?"

"Just about all I was worth," laughed the other, sending down the remains of his whisky-and-selzogene with infinite gusto.

"I'm afraid you'll find these quarters a bit rough, Ancram," said Lamont. "New country, you know, and all that kind of thing."

The other protested that he liked nothing better than roughing it, and how awfully jolly it was to run against Lamont again. But even he was conscious of a something which restrained him from making further reference to Courtland.

Outwardly Ancram was a tall, well-built fellow, several years younger than Lamont. He was good-looking, but the face was one of a very ordinary type, with nothing about it to stamp itself upon the recollection. As a fellow-guest at Courtland, Lamont had rather disliked him for his own sake, and still more because he had tried to get between himself and Violet. Moreover, Ancram had been among those who muttered against him on the bank of the frozen mere what time his *fiancée* had put upon him that abominable and unmerited insult. And now the fellow turned up here, claiming his hospitality, and talking to him as if he was his dearest friend.

"Excuse my seeming inhospitality, Ancram," he said. "I must go and help give an eye to the off-loading, but if you like to go in there you'll find all the ingredients for a wash-up. We shall have supper directly."

"Oh, that's quite all right, old chap," was the airy reply, "By the way, I'll come with you."

Outside, by the light of three or four lanterns, several natives were busily unloading the donkey-carts and transferring their contents to the strongly-built hut which constituted the store-room: bags and boxes, and pockets of sugar, and packages of candles and soap – all sorts of necessities and a few luxuries.

"Aha!" laughed Peters, shaking one case; "was beginning to think this had been forgotten. What'd become of us then, hey, Ancram?"

"Why, what is it?"

"Scotch. Pother's Squareface. Well, we're nearly through now, and I shan't be sorry to get my champers into a steak of that sable."

"Well, you won't be able to," said Lamont. "There's none left. But I went down into 'the poultry yard' and picked up a few pheasants."

“We call the river bank our poultry yard, Ancram,” explained Peters, when they were seated at table discussing the products of the same. “When we first came up here, Lamont and I, if we wanted a bird or two we just went to the door and shot it. Now you have to go away from the homestead a bit, but you can always get as many as you want. Are you fond of shooting?”

“Rather. I say, Lamont, d’you remember what jolly shoots we had at Courtland?”

“Are you fond of fighting, Ancram?” said Lamont.

The other stared. There was a grim directness in the question. Both were thinking the same thing. It seemed an odd question to be put by a man who had been publicly accused of cowardice. Its propounder was enjoying the other’s confusion.

“Fighting?” echoed Ancram.

“Yes. Because if you are you’ve come to the right shop for it. You’ll get plenty if you remain in the country, and that before very long too.”

“Why? Who is there to fight?”

“The Matabele.”

“But I thought they were all conquered – licked into a cocked hat.”

“So did, so do, a lot of other people who ought to know better. But they’re not. Let this rinderpest go a little further, and when the Government has shot a few more of their cattle – then we shall see.”

“By Jove! I had no idea of that.”

“Or you wouldn’t have come,” Lamont could not help appending. He had detected a note of consternation in Ancram’s tone. And Ancram was one of those who had stood by and endorsed the accusation of cowardice hurled against himself.

“Oh yes, I would,” answered the other, with rather a forced laugh. “But I say, Lamont, what about you two fellows – and others in a lonely place like this? Where would you come in?”

“Nowhere, unless we got wind and scooted in time. But that’s just the difficulty.”

“Phew! But don’t you take any precaution?”

“Not any. We take our chance instead. Chance is the name of a very great god up-country, as you’ll find out if you stop out here long.”

“Well, it would be a jolly good job if we did have a war,” rejoined Ancram airily. “Give us lots of fun. I should enjoy it.”

Peters looked quickly up.

“Fun! Enjoy it!” he repeated. “D’you hear that, Lamont? Wonder how much *fun* he’d have voted it – how much he’d have *enjoyed* it – if he’d been along with us on the retreat from the Shangani.”

“Oh, damn the retreat from the Shangani!” burst forth Lamont. “Ain’t you sick of that sick old yarn yet, Peters? Because I am.”

Ancram stared. There seemed nothing to warrant the ill-tempered outburst – unless – Ah, that was it. Lamont had hoisted the white feather in some way while on the expedition referred to, and of course was shy of hearing it mentioned. But, strangely enough, Peters didn’t seem to resent the tone or the brusque interruption. On the contrary he inclined to the apologetic.

“Oh, keep your hair on, Lamont,” he answered deprecatingly. “You know, Ancram, I shouldn’t be here now if it hadn’t been for – ”

“Will you have another whisky-and-selz, Ancram, or will you try some black tea?” interrupted Lamont, speaking quickly. “Can’t offer you any milk with it because of the drought, except tinned, and that makes it entirely beastly.”

“I should think so,” answered Ancram, again wondering at the rudeness of the pointed interruption. “But isn’t it the deuce on the nerves? Keeps you awake, and all that.”

“In civilisation it would. Not up here. I’ve often, while lying out in camp, polished off three big beakers of it – black as ink, mind – and dropped off fast asleep when only half through my first pipe.”

“By Jove! that knocks a good old superstition endways, anyway.”

“Good job if they were all knocked endways. Now here’s another – ” And then Lamont, fastening on to another topic proceeded to thresh it out, and, in fact, for him, became quite voluble, so much so that Peters could not have got a word in edgeways even if he had wanted to, which he did not. At him Ancram stole more than one glance, expecting to descry an offended look. But he descried nothing of the sort. Peters went on placidly with his supper, nodding occasional assent to the other’s remarks. But Lamont had got what he wanted; he had got clean away from the retreat from the Shangani. There was no possibility of reopening that subject, short of dragging it in by the tail. All of which set the new arrival wondering still more.

“Then if these Matabele chaps were to rise,” went on Ancram, “you – we – should all get our throats cut?”

“From ear to ear,” supplied Lamont, with grim uncompromising crispness.

“Oh, come. I say, Lamont, you’re getting at a fellow, don’t you know.”

“No, I don’t. But if you don’t believe me ask Peters.”

“The Captain’s – er – oh! – ah! – I mean Lamont’s right,” declared Peters, half briskly, half deprecatorily, as he noted the positive scowl which wrinkled his friend’s dark brows. The reason wherefor was that the latter, having held a subordinate command during the war of occupation, had experienced much trouble in convincing Peters and others that they were not to call him ‘Captain’ ever after. That sort of tin-pot aping of military rank was bad enough while they were on active service, he declared – afterwards it was simply poisonous, and there were enough ‘captains’ and ‘majors’ and ‘colonels’ knocking about Matabeleland to stock a whole Army Corps with, if they had been genuine.

Again Ancram wondered. What the deuce did it all mean, he tried to unravel, that a tough, hard-bitten frontiersman, such as he had already estimated Peters to be, should care twopence for the frown or smile of a fellow like Lamont, whom he himself had seen show the white feather on an occasion when there was the least possible excuse of all for it – indeed, he wished he himself had been at hand at the time, instead of arriving on the scene just after the rescue had been effected? Yet, somehow, there was something very solid, very square, about this, as even he realised, involuntary host of his, sitting there the very embodiment of self-possession, devil-may-care-ishness, even masterful dominance. It did not fit in, somehow, with that scene in the falling dusk, by the frozen mere at Courtland, on Christmas Eve.

“But,” he persisted, “do you really and seriously mean, Lamont, that if these chaps were to break out to-night they would cut all our throats?”

“Really and seriously, Ancram. But didn’t I tell you that the great god Chance was a ruling factor up here? You’ll soon tumble to his little ways. Here – try some of this Magaliesburg,” pushing a large two-pound bag towards him.

“Er – thanks. I think I’ll stick to my mixture. The fellows at Pagadi gave me some of that the other night, and I didn’t care for it.”

“Oh, that’ll pass. You’ll soon not look at anything else,” chipped in Peters briskly, filling his own pipe. He had sized up the new-comer as being very raw, very green. But then he had seen plenty such before. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, listening intently.

“D’you hear that, Lamont?” he said eagerly.

“Yes,” was the answer, after a moment of careful listening.

“Why – what – what is it?” broke in Ancram, and there was a note of scare in his voice. In the light of their previous conversation it must be at least the Matabele war-cry, he decided.

“There it is again,” said Peters. “Did you hear?”

“Yes,” answered Lamont. “You may be in luck’s way yet, Ancram, and get a shot at a lion. They are over there, in the Ramabana Forest, though whether they’ll be there still to-morrow is another thing. Let’s get outside and listen.”

Ancram, to be candid with himself, would much rather have remained inside. He had an idea that a lion might pounce upon him the moment he set foot in the darkness outside.

In the soft velvet of the black sky a myriad of stars hung. So near did they seem that the flash of flaming planets was even as the burning of distant worlds. The ghostly stretch of veldt around was wrapped in darkness and mystery, and from afar, just audible on the waft of stillness, came a succession of hollow, coughing roars.

“Don’t send up your hopes too high, Ancram,” said Lamont, emitting quick puffs from his pipe. “You may not get a show at them after all. Lions are very sporadic. Here to-night, fifty miles off to-morrow morning.”

Ancram devoutly hoped these might be five hundred miles off, as he answered —

“Ah yes. That’s the beastly bore of it. I’d like to have had a shot at them, I must say.”

“Oh, we’ll fix you up with that, sooner or later, sonny, never fear,” said Peters cheerfully. “If not to-morrow, later on we’ll worry up a trip, and it’ll be hard if we don’t turn you out a big ‘un.”

Then a friendly wrangle ensued between Lamont and Peters as to whether wild animals, and especially lions, would come into houses after anything. Lamont declared they wouldn’t, and Peters cited instances where they had, not at first hand however; and at length by the time the guest was told off to his makeshift couch in the living-room, he was so worked up to the terrors of this strange wild land, to which he had been fool enough to come, that he spent half the night wondering whether the outer door would for a moment resist the furious rush of a famished beast, or whether the window was of sufficient width to admit such.

Whereby it is manifest that Lamont and the other had taken in the stranger in more ways than one.

Chapter Four.

Peters – Prospector

It was lunch time at Peters' prospecting camp, and Peters, seated on a pile of old sacks, was busy opening a bully-beef tin. Having extracted its indifferently appetising contents, by dint of shaking out the same on to an enamelled metal plate, he chucked the empty tin away over his shoulder, thus mechanically adding another 'brick' to a sort of crescent-shaped miniature wall, some ten feet behind, which had been formed gradually out of exactly similar tins, and by a similar mechanical process. Three native 'boys,' squatted at a respectful distance, were puffing at their pipes and conversing in a drowsy hum, the burden of their debate being as to whose turn it might be to consume such remnants of the repast as their master might leave: such being, of course, a thing apart from, and outside of, their regular rations.

In the forefront was a windlass and a vast pile of earth and stones, for Peters was sinking a shaft. Two hastily run-up huts served to house the said boys, between which stood a Scotch cart, covered with tarpaulin. Peters himself slept at Lamont's, on whose farm these mining operations were being conducted. In the ultimate success of these Peters had immense faith. "We'll make another Sheba Reef out of this yet, Lamont," he was wont to declare. "This place has gold on it, and plenty, if we only sink deep enough. You'll see it has." To which Lamont would reply that he only hoped it might, but that he didn't for a moment believe it would.

Who Peters was, or where he had come from, nobody knew. He was a prospector, and had never been known as anything else. Some opined that he had at one time been a sailor, and there were certain grounds for believing this, in that he would, when off his guard, betray an acquaintance both extensive and accurate with the technique of the sea. Those who tried to draw him got no further. He never gave the idea of being particularly anxious to conceal anything: simply he never talked about himself. It was puzzling, but – there it remained.

Then certain inquisitive souls conceived the inspiration of getting him to talk in his cups. But the drawback to the carrying of it out lay in the fact that Peters never was in his cups. He could drink the whole lot of them under the table, if put to it; and indeed did so, on more than one occasion, sitting there smiling all the time, as they reproachfully put it. Oh, he was a hard nail!

He was good-nature itself, as long as no one tried to take advantage of it. When they did, then let them look out. His prime detestation was 'side,' as more than one young new arrival from England in the early days discovered to his own amazement and discomfiture. His prime predilection was Lamont, of whom, their mutual acquaintances were wont to pronounce, he made a little tin god on wheels. Yet no two men could, in character, be more utterly dissimilar.

Their friendship dated from the war of occupation, in which they had both served. During the historic retreat on the Shangani, Lamont had saved his life, and that under circumstances demanding an intrepidity bordering on foolhardiness. Wounded and incapacitated, he had dropped behind unnoticed what time the Matabele were pressing the sorely harassed column, and Lamont had dashed back to his rescue when his falling into the hands of the savages was but a question of moments – already indeed had he placed his pistol to his head rather than be thus captured. This was the incident he had been trying to relate to Ancram, when Lamont had twice cut him short with what the guest had deemed brusque and unnecessary rudeness.

Having finished his meal Peters lighted a digestive pipe, and sent his plate skimming away in the direction of the boys, who immediately pounced upon the scraps; for there is never a moment in life when a native is not ready to feed, and nothing eatable that he will refuse to feed on – except fish.

"Hey, Malvani?" he called.

"*Nkose!*" And one of the boys came trotting up.

“What of Inyovu? Will he come back, do you think?”

“*Ou nkose!*” said the fellow with a half grin. “Who may say? He is Matabele. We are not.”

“Well, get to work again.”

“*Nkose.*”

Peters sat a little longer thinking – and the subject of his thoughts was the man whose life he had saved – to wit Ancram.

“I don’t like the cuss,” he said to himself. “Wish I’d left him where he was – no – I don’t exactly that – still, I wish he’d move on. He’s an ungrateful dog, anyhow.”

The noonday air was sensuous and drowsy. Even the screech of the crickets was so unintermittent as to form part of the prevailing stillness. Peters began to nod.

“*Nkose!*”

The salutation was sulky rather than hearty. Peters started wide awake again, to behold his missing boy, Inyovu.

The latter was a young Matabele, tall and slight, and clad in nothing but an old shirt and a skin *mútya*. But his face was the face of a truculent savage – the face of one who would have been far more in his element as a unit in some marauding expedition sent forth by Lobengula in the good old times, than serving in the peaceful avocation of mine boy to a white prospector.

“I see you, Inyovu,” returned Peters, speaking fluently in the Sindabele. “But I have not seen you for half a day when I should have seen you working.” The point of which satire was that the fellow had taken French leave since the night before.

“*Au!*” he replied, half defiantly. “I have been to see my chief.”

“Been to see your chief —*impela!* Who is your chief, Inyovu? The man who pays you or the man who does not?”

Natives are susceptible to ridicule, and Peters had a satirical way with him which lay rather in the tone than in the words used. The three Makalaka boys in the background sniggered, and this acted as a whip to the Matabele.

“My chief?” he blared. “My chief? *Whau, Mlungu!* Zwabeka is my chief.”

The tone apart, to address his master as *Umlungu*— meaning simply ‘white man’ – was to invite – well, a breach of the peace. But Peters kept his temper.

“Then – O great chief Inyovu,” he said, still more cuttingly, “in that case it might be as well to return to thy chief, Zwabeka. I have no use at all for servants who own two chiefs. No. No use.”

“*Xi!*”

At the utterance of this contemptuous ‘click’ Peters did not keep his temper. His right fist shot forth with lightning-like suddenness and celerity, catching its imprudent utterer bang on the nose. He, staggering back, seized a pick-handle – an uncommonly awkward weapon, by the way – and, uttering a savage snarl, came for his smiter. The while the three Makalaka boys, in huge if secret delight, stood by to watch the fun.

And they got it – plenty of it. Peters was far too old a campaigner to be taken at any such disadvantage. He was upon the young savage in a flash, had him by the throat with one hand, and the pick-handle with the other, just as swiftly. Inyovu seeing the game was up wrenched himself free, and turned to run, leaving the pick-handle with the enemy. Alack and alas! The mouth of the shaft was immediately behind him, and, losing his footing on some loose stones, he plunged in and disappeared from view. Then Peters threw back his head and roared with laughter. So too did the Makalakas. In fact their paroxysms seemed to threaten ultimate dissolution, as they twisted and squirmed and hugged themselves in their mirth.

“*Woza!* We must get him out!” he cried at last. The shaft was no great depth as yet, luckily for Inyovu. Moreover, the bucket for hauling up the dirt was down there, and a spasmodic quiver of the rope showed that the ill-advised one was already climbing up, even if he had not arrested his fall by seizing the rope and holding on. Then, by their master’s orders, the boys manned the windlass, though

so weakened by their recurring laughter they could hardly turn the handle, indeed were in danger of letting go every minute. At last the unfortunate one's head rose above the mouth of the hole, and in a moment more he was standing glaring at his master with sulky apprehension.

But Peters had enjoyed a good laugh, and all his anger had vanished.

"Now, Inyovu," he said cheerily, "get to work again."

And Inyovu did.

Peace having been restored, the usual labour proceeded. Suddenly Peters' horse, which was knee-haltered among the bushes hard by, began to whinny, then to neigh. That meant the proximity of another horse, and a minute or two later Lamont rode up alone.

"Hallo, Peters! Nothing to make us millionaires to-day? What?" he sung out. "No sign of the stuff?"

"Oh, that'll come. You've got the grin now, but we'll both have it – in the right direction too – when this bit of bush-veldt's humming with battery stamps and you and I are boss directors of the new fraud," answered Peters equably. They were to be joint partners in the results – if any – of Peters' prospecting, at any rate while such was carried on upon Lamont's farm.

"Hope springs eternal... or there'd be no prospectors," laughed the latter as he dismounted from his horse. "See here, Peters. I wish you'd left our desirable guest where he was, or taken him away somewhere else – anything rather than bring him here."

"What could I do, Lamont?" was the deprecating reply. "He said he was a pal of yours, and had come up-country on purpose to find you."

"As for the first, he lied. I hardly knew the fellow, and what little I saw of him I disliked. For the second, I've no doubt he did. No. You brought him, and you'll have to take him away."

"Well, I'll try and think out a plan."

"If you don't, one of two things will happen. Either he'll take over the whole show or I shall be indicted for murder."

"Couldn't we set up a sort of Matabele rising scare, and rush him off to Gandela?" said Peters, brightening up. "I've a notion he isn't brimming over with eagerness for a fight."

"The worst of setting up scares is that they're apt to travel farther than you mean them to, especially just now when that sort of scare may any moment become grim reality. No, I'm afraid that plan won't do."

"Isn't there anyone you could pass him on to? Why not give him an introduction to Christian Sybrandt, and fire him off to Buluwayo?"

"Because I wouldn't give him an introduction to anybody – not on any account. See here, Peters. I don't like the fellow – never did, and he knows it too. But he's going to exploit me all he knows how, and – that won't be far. You remember that – er – that rotten affair I told you about – you know, the thing that had to do with my coming out here again when I did? Well, this fellow Ancram was there at the time. Helped to hoot me down, you understand."

"Did he? The rotten, infernal swine! If I had known half that perhaps I would have left him for jackal's meat in the mopani before I moved finger, let alone touched trigger, to get him out," said Peters savagely. "By the Lord! I wonder you let him set foot inside the door after that."

"What could one do? You can't turn a fellow away from your door, in this country, in a state of practical destitution, – for that's what being without a horse amounts to. I wish you could have saved his horse, Peters. And now he's been here ten days, and seems to think he owns the whole show. What do you think he's been up to this morning?"

"What?"

"Why I sent him out to shoot birds, or anything he darn chose, along the river bank – anything to get rid of him. I sent Zingela with him to take care of him, and carry the birds. Blest if he didn't start pounding Zingela."

Peters whistled.

“That’s pretty thick,” he said.

“Thick! I should think so. Swore the boy had cheeked him, and he hated niggers, and so forth. Coming on to another man’s place – without an invite, mind you – and then sailing in to bash his boys. Eh?”

“Yes. But had Zingela cheeked him?”

“Small wonder if he had. But all I could get out of the boy was that Ancram abused him because he couldn’t find a guinea-fowl that had run. He owned to having answered he wasn’t a dog. Then Ancram let into him. I’m not a good-tempered chap, Peters, and there’ll be a most unholy row soon. What’s to be done?”

“I have it,” cried Peters, his whimsical face puckering all over with glee. “I have it. You know how skeery he looked when we were telling him about the possibility of a rising. Well then, let’s cram him up that the Matabele are awful vindictive devils, and Zingela will never rest till he has his blood. How’s that?”

“Well, that’s an idea.”

“Rather. He’ll wilt at the notion of a bloodthirsty savage, always looking out for his chance, day and night – especially the night, mind – of getting an assegai into him. I believe that’ll do the trick. What?”

“I shouldn’t wonder. By Jove, Peters, you’re a genius. Well, you work it. If we both do, it’ll look suspicious.”

“Right! I will. Still the fellow can be amusing at times. I’ll never forget that first time we introduced ourselves. ‘I’m Peters, prospector,’ says I. ‘And I’m Ancram, prospectless,’ says he, without a moment’s thought.”

And Peters went off into a roar over the recollection.

Chapter Five.

Ancram – Prospectless

In crediting his unwelcome guest with a desire to ‘take over the whole show,’ Lamont was stating no more than was warranted by fact. For Ancram had made himself rather more than very much at home, to such an extent indeed that he might have been the owner of the place. Further, he had adopted a kind of elder-brotherly tone towards Lamont, and a patronising one towards Peters: and of this, and of him altogether, small wonder that both men were already thoroughly sick. Moreover, he showed not the slightest symptom of moving on.

As a sacrifice on the sacred altar of hospitality Lamont had conscientiously striven to conceal his dislike for the man, had even gone out of the way in order to make time pass pleasantly for him, in pursuance of which idea he had stood from him what he would have stood from nobody else. All of which Ancram put down to a wrong motive, and made himself more objectionable still.

“What are your plans, Ancram?” said Lamont, the day after the foregoing conversation.

“Oh, my dear fellow, it’s so jolly here with you I hadn’t begun to think of any.”

Lamont’s face was stony grim in its effort to repress a frown.

“It brings back dear old Courtland,” went on Ancram, watching his host narrowly. “Now you don’t knock up against anyone who knows Courtland too, every day out here, Lamont?”

“No. I don’t know that that’s any loss, by the way.”

“Not? Now I should have thought – er – that for old acquaintance’ sake you’d – er – but then – er – I was forgetting. What a fool I am.”

He little suspected how cordially his listener was agreeing.

“You see, it’s this way, Lamont. I came out here to see what I could do in the gold digging or farming line, or something of that sort. What could I?”

“Do you want a candid opinion, Ancram?”

“Yes. What could I?”

“Nothing.”

The other stared, then laughed unpleasantly.

“You left your things at Pagadi,” went on Lamont. “My advice is get back to Fagadi, pick up your traps – thence, to England.”

The other laughed again, still more unpleasantly.

“Meaning that you want me out of the country,” he said.

It was Lamont’s turn to stare.

“I’m very dense,” he said, “but for the life of me I can’t see what the devil interest your being in the country or out of it can have for me.”

“We were at Courtland together,” rejoined Ancram meaningly.

“A remarkable coincidence no doubt. Still – it doesn’t explain anything.”

“I thought perhaps you might find it awkward – er – anyone being here who was – er – there at that time.”

“Then like many another you have proved ‘thought’ a desperately unreliable prompter. Candidly, my dear fellow, since you put it that way, I don’t care a twopenny damn whether you are in this country or in any other. Now?”

Lamont spoke quickly and was fast losing his temper. He pulled himself up with a sort of gulping effort. Ancram, noting this, could hardly suppress the sneer which rose to his face, for he read it entirely wrong.

“That fetched him,” he was thinking to himself. “He’s funkng now. He’s probably got another girl out here, and he’s afraid I’ll blab about the white feather business. All right, my good friend

Lamont. I've got you under my thumb, as I intended, and you'll have to put me in the way of something good – or – that little story will come in handy. It'll bear some touching up, too."

"I was speaking in your own interest, Ancram," went on Lamont. "Anyone can see with half an eye that you're not in the least cut out for life in this country, and you'd only be throwing away your time and money."

"Wish I'd got some to throw. I thought perhaps I might stop and do a little farming with you."

"But farming needs some capital. You can't do it on nothing. It's a losing game even then, especially now that rinderpest is clearing us all out. Don't you know any people in Buluwayo who could put you into the way of getting some job under Government, or in the mining department or something?"

"Not a soul. Wish I did. But, I say, Lamont, why are you so jolly certain I'm no good for this country? I haven't had a show yet."

"Oh, I can see. For one thing, if you start pounding the niggers about, like you did Zingela yesterday, you'll get an assegai through you."

It came to him as an inspiration, in pursuance of their plan of the previous day. And Ancram was green.

"No! Are they such revengeful devils as all that?"

"Well, they don't like being bashed, any more than other people. And – a savage is always a savage."

"By Jove! What d'you think, Lamont? Supposing I gave this chap something? Would that make it all right? Eh?"

"Then he'd think you were afraid of him."

And to Lamont, who knew that the gift of a piece of tobacco and a sixpence would cause honest Zingela positively to beam upon his assailant of yesterday, the situation was too funny. But he wanted to get rid of the other, and the opportunity seemed too good to be lost. The scare had begun.

"You have got a jolly place here, Lamont, and you don't seem overworked either, by Jove!" went on Ancram, with more than a dash of envy in his tone, as he gazed forth over the sunlit landscape, dotted with patches of bush, stretching away to the dark line of forest beyond, for the two men were seated in front of the house, beneath the extension of the roof which formed a rough verandah.

"Yes. You were talking of Courtland – well, I'm nearly as big a landowner here as the old Squire. Funny, isn't it? As for being overworked, that comes by fits and starts. Just now there's nothing much to do but shoot and bury your infected cattle, and watch the remainder die of drought."

"Phew! I can't think how you fellows can smoke such stuff as that," said Ancram disgustedly, as the other started a fresh pipe of Magaliesburg. "The very whiff of it is enough to make one sick."

"Sorry; you must get used to it though, if you're going to stop in the country," rejoined Lamont, unconcernedly blowing out great clouds. "Have another drink? The whiff of that doesn't make you sick, eh?"

"You're right there, old chap," laughed Ancram. "This is a deuced thirsty country of yours, Lamont, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Oh dear, no! Never mind me. It's all that, even when there isn't a drought on."

"Now I could understand a fellow like Peters smoking that stuff," said Ancram, going back to the question of the tobacco. "But you, who've had an opportunity of knowing better – that's a thing I can hardly take in. By the way, Lamont, while on the subject of Peters, I think he's too beastly familiar and patronising altogether."

"Patronising – 'm – yes."

If Ancram perceived the crispness of the tone, the snap in his host's eyes, he, thinking the latter was afraid of him, enjoyed being provocative all the more.

"Yes. For instance, I think it infernal cheek a fellow of that sort calling us by our names – without any mister or anything. And the chummy way in which he's always talking to me. It's a little

too thick. A common chap like that – who murders the Queen’s English. No; I’m getting damn tired of Peters.”

“Quite sure Peters isn’t getting damn tired of you?”

“Eh? Oh come, I say, Lamont! You’re always getting at a fellow, you know.”

Lamont was inwardly raging. He had exaggerated ideas of the obligations of hospitality, and this fellow was his guest – an uninvited one certainly, but still his guest. And he – could he control himself much longer?

“I told you you weren’t in the least cut out for life in this country, Ancram,” he said at last, striving to speak evenly. “For instance, according to its customs even the blasphemy of Peters daring to call you by your name doesn’t justify you in abusing a man who has saved your life; for if it hadn’t been for him you’d be a well-gnawed skeleton in the mopani belt down the Pagadi road this very moment. Wait a bit,” – as the other was about to interrupt. “It may surprise you to hear it – they call this a land of surprises – but there’s no man alive for whom I have a greater regard than I have for Peters. He’s my friend – my *friend*, you understand – and if you’re so tired of him I can only think of one remedy. I can lend you a horse and a boy to show you the way. There’s a hotel at Gandela. The accommodation there is indifferent, but at any rate you won’t be tired by Peters.”

It was out at last. Ancram had gone too far. Would he take him at his word? thought Lamont, hoping in the affirmative. But before the other could reply one way or the other there was a trampling of hoofs, and a man on horseback came round the corner of the house.

“Hallo, Driffield! Where have you dropped from?” cried Lamont, greeting the new-comer cordially.

“Home. I’m off on a small patrol. Thought, as it was near dinner-time, I’d sponge on you, Lamont. Where’s Peters?”

“Up at his camp. He never comes down till evening. Er – Ancram. This is Driffield, our Native Commissioner. What he don’t know about the guileless savage isn’t worth knowing.”

“Glad to meet you,” said that official as they shook hands. “You needn’t take in everything Lamont says, all the same,” he laughed. “I say, Lamont, it’s a pity Peters isn’t here. I’m always missing the old chap.”

“I’ll send up for him, and he’ll be here in half an hour or so. I’ll see to your horse and start Zingela off at once. But – first of all have a drink. We won’t get dinner for half an hour yet.”

“Thanks, I will,” laughed the new arrival. “Thirsty country this, eh, Mr – ?”

“Ancram,” supplied that worthy. “Thirsty? I believe you. We were talking of that very thing just before you came.”

Two things had struck Ancram – the frank cordiality that seemed to be the predominant note among these dwellers in the wilderness, and that his own opinion of Peters was by no means shared by others. There he had made a *faux pas*. But he did not intend to take Lamont at his word, all the same; wherefore it was just as well that this new arrival had appeared on the scene when he had.

“What’ll you have, Driffield?” said Lamont, as the four sat down to table a little later – Peters having arrived. “Tisn’t Hobson’s choice this time – it’s guinea-fowl or goat ribs.”

“The last. They look young. I’ll get enough game on patrol.”

“Going to look in at Zwabeka’s kraal, Driffield?” said Peters presently.

“If I do it’ll be on the way back. I’ve got to meet Ames to-morrow evening at the Umgwane Drift, and settle which the devil of us Tolozi is under. Half his people are in Sikumbutana. Ames is quite welcome to him for me.”

“Nice fellow, Ames,” said Peters.

“Rather. One of the best we’ve got, and one of the smartest. He’s got a ticklish district, too, with the whole of Madula’s and half Zazwe’s people in it. Hard luck to saddle him with Tolozi into the bargain. Yes, Ames is a ripping good chap. Been long in this country, Mr Ancram?”

“Er – no. I’ve only just come.”

"Peters picked him up in the mopani veldt, down Pagadi way, and brought him on," said Lamont. "He was nearly dead of thirst."

"And something else" is how the whimsical look which puckered the quaint countenance of Peters might have been interpreted. Driffield whistled.

"You were in luck's way, Mr Ancram," he said. "That's an awful bit of country. More than one man has gone missing there and never been heard of again." And the whimsicality of Peters' look was enhanced.

"I suppose you haven't seen much of the country then?" went on Driffield. "I wonder if you'd care to come along with me now. I could show you a pretty wild slice of it, and any number of Matabele at home, into the bargain."

"There's your chance, Ancram," cried Peters. "By Jove! there's your chance."

"I should like it. But – er – is it safe?" replied Ancram, bearing in mind Lamont's remarks the night of his arrival. Driffield stared, then choked down his efforts not to splutter.

"Safe?" he said. "Well, I've got a life to lose, and so has Ames. And we neither of us expect to lose it just yet."

"Yes; I'd like to come, but – I've no horse."

"Daresay I can lend you one," said Lamont. "You'll want a couple of blankets too. How are your donkeys loaded, Driffield?"

"Lightly loaded, so that won't be in the way. Very well, then. Can you be ready in an hour's time?"

"Oh, there's no such hurry, Driffield," urged Peters. "Now you've lugged me away from my millionaire factory, you must make it worth while, and let's have time for a smoke and a yarn."

The Native Commissioner agreed to start an hour later; and then there was much chaff at Peters' expense in his prospecting operations. Then Driffield said —

"You'll be coming over to the race meeting at Gandela, I suppose, Lamont?"

"Don't know. When is it?"

"End of week after next."

"I don't care much for race meetings."

"Oh, but there'll be a regular gymkhana – tent-pegging and all sorts of fun. Oh, and Miss Vidal says you are to be sure and turn up."

"Oh, get out with you, Driffield, and take that yarn somewhere else."

"It's a solemn fact, Lamont. She was booming you no end the other day – saying what a devil of a chap you were, and all that sort of thing. I asked her if I should tell you to roll up at the race meeting, and she answered in that candid, innocent way of hers 'Of course.' You can't stay away after that. Can he, Peters?"

"Not much."

"Oh well, I'll go then."

"You're in luck's way, Lamont. Miss Vidal's far and away the nicest girl anywhere round here."

"She's all that, I allow." But a subtle note in the tone was not lost upon one – and that one Ancram.

"So there is a girl in the case!" pronounced that worthy to himself. "I thought there would be. And he would have cleared me out? Not yet, friend Lamont. Not yet! Not until I've turned you to real good, material use." And he now congratulated himself upon the Native Commissioner's invitation to join his expedition, for in the course of the same he would contrive to pump that official on the subject of Lamont and his circumstances and standing in the locality, in such wise that it would be hard if he could not turn the knowledge to the account of his own especial advantage.

Chapter Six.

The Desire of Gandela

“What on earth have you been doing to Jim Steele, Clare?” said Mrs Fullerton, as she came into her drawing-room, and sank into a cane chair. “He passed me in the gate looking as black as thunder. He made a lug at his hat, growled like a dog, and was off like a shot. Look! there he goes,” pointing to a fast-receding figure pounding down the strip of dusty road that fronted the straggling line of unpretentious bungalows.

“I only refused him,” was the half-laughing, half-sad reply. “What else was I to do when I don’t care two brass buttons about the man? Really, Lucy, there are drawbacks attendant on life in a country where there are not enough women to go round. He is only the fifth since I’ve been up here.” Even had there been enough women to go round, as the speaker put it, assuredly she herself would not have come in last among them, if there are any powers of attraction in an oval face and straight features, a profusion of golden-brown hair, deep blue Irish eyes thickly fringed with dark lashes, and a mouth of the Cupid-bow order. Add to this a beautifully proportioned figure, rather tall than short, and it is hardly to be wondered that most of the men in the township of Gandela and all the region round about went mad over Clare Vidal. Her married sister, Lucy Fullerton, formed a complete contrast, in that she was short and matronly of build, but she was a bright, pretty, winsome little thing, and correspondingly popular.

“Well, you shouldn’t be so dangerous, you queenly Clare,” she retorted, unpinning her hat and flinging it across the room. “Really it was an act of deadly hostility towards all our good friends to have brought you up here to play football with their hearts and their peace of mind. Not that Jim Steele is any great catch, poor fellow.”

“Oh, he’ll get over it,” said Clare. “They all do.”

From this it must not be imputed to her that she was vain and heartless. For the first, she was wonderfully free from vanity considering her powers of attraction. For the last, her own heart had never been touched, wherefore she was simply unable to understand the feeling in the case of other people, apart from the fact that her words were borne out by the results of her own observation.

“There was Captain Isard,” went on Mrs Fullerton, “and Mr Slark, who they say has good prospects, and will be a baronet at his father’s death. You sent them to the right-about too.”

“For the first – life in the Matabeleland Mounted Police doesn’t strike me as ideal,” laughed Clare. “For the second – fancy going through life labelled Slark. Even, eventually, *Lady Slark* wouldn’t palliate it. Besides, I don’t care twopence for either.”

“Who do you care twopence for, among all this throwing of handkerchiefs? There’s Mr Lamont –”

“He never made a fool of himself in that way. He hasn’t got it in him,” struck in Clare, speaking rather more quickly.

Her sister smiled to herself at this kindling of animation.

“Hasn’t got it in him?” she repeated, innocently mischievous. “You mean he’s too great a fool?”

“I mean just the reverse. He’s got too much in him.”

“But – you know, dear, what they say about him – that he’s – er – a bit of a funkstick.”

“Bit of a funkstick! Pooh! Look at his face, Lucy. How can a man with a face like that have an atom of cowardice in his composition? Why, it’s too ridiculous.” And the whole-souled contempt which Clare infused into this vindication would have inspired wild exultation in the breast of any one of her multifold adorers near and far, had it been uttered in his own behalf. Yet her acquaintance with the object thereof was of the slightest. “Well, you know they say that one evening there was a bit of a row on over at the hotel – horrid, quarrelsome, fighting creatures men are – and someone

insulted Lamont, or trod on his toes, or something, and, when he objected, the other wanted him to fight; and he quite climbed down.”

“I don’t believe it – or, at any rate, the motive they put upon it,” said Clare decidedly. “People have a way of piling on to their stories in the most recklessly top-heavy manner. In all probability he was more than the other’s match, and kept out of it on that account.”

“You make an effective champion, Clare,” laughed the other, mischievously. “Well I don’t know the ins and outs of it. Dick knows more about it than I do.”

“Oho! What does Dick know more about than you do?” hailed a voice outside the window, and its owner immediately entered, accompanied by another man. “Anyhow, that’s a big bit of news to start with – that Dick should know more about anything under the sun than you do. Here’s Driffield, and he’s going to stay lunch.”

“Dick, don’t be silly. How do you do, Mr Driffield,” greeting the Native Commissioner. “We were talking about Mr Lamont, and what they say about him. Clare says she doesn’t believe a word of it, and I was saying you knew more about it than I do, Dick.”

“Do you mean the breeze at Foster’s?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he did climb down. There’s no doubt about it. And the funny part of it is, that with the gloves on there’s hardly a man anywhere in these parts who can touch him.”

“There you are, Lucy,” cried Clare triumphantly. “Didn’t I tell you it was because he was more than the other’s match?”

“Well, it hadn’t got a look that way at the time, and that was what struck everybody who saw it. Certainly it struck me,” replied Fullerton. “But the next time you girls start taking away your neighbours’ characters, don’t do it at the top of your voices with window and door wide open. We could hear you all down the road. Couldn’t we, Driffield?”

“Mr Driffield sets a higher value on his immortal soul than you do on yours, Dick,” retorted Mrs Fullerton loftily. “Consequently he isn’t going to back you in your – ahem! – unveracity.”

“No. But he’s dying of thirst, Lucy. So am I.”

She laughed, and took the hint. Then as the two men put down their glasses, Fullerton went on —

“Talking of the gloves – that reminds me of another time when Lamont climbed down. That time he put on the gloves with Voss. It was a beautiful spar, and really worth seeing. Then, just as the fun was at its height, Lamont suddenly turned quite white – as white as such a swarthy beggar can turn, that is – and chucked up the sponge then and there.”

“Yes. I remember that. It looked rum certainly – but all the same I’ll maintain that Lamont’s no coward. He showed no sign of it in the war of ’93 anyway. If anything rather the reverse.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Clare significantly.

“May have lost his nerve since,” said her brother-in-law, also significantly.

“Well, I like Lamont,” said Driffield decidedly.

“I don’t,” said Fullerton, equally so.

“Mind you, he’s a chap who wants knowing a bit,” went on the Native Commissioner. “Then he’s all right.”

“Is he coming to the race meeting, Mr Driffield?” said Clare.

“Yes. He didn’t intend to, though, until I gave him your message, Miss Vidal. We pointed out to him that he couldn’t stop away after that.”

“Message! But I sent him no message.”

“Oh, Miss Vidal! Come now – think again.”

“Really, Mr Driffield, I ought to be very angry with you for twisting my words like that,” laughed Clare. “But – you mean well, so let it pass. You are forgiven.”

“Talking of Lamont,” struck in Fullerton, who had a wearisome way of harking back to a subject long after everybody else had done with it, “there’s a yarn going about that he had to leave his own neighbourhood in England for showing the white feather. And it looks like it, remembering what a close Johnny he is about himself.”

Driffield looked up quickly.

“I believe I know who put that yarn about,” he said. “Wasn’t it Ancram – that new man who’s putting up at Foster’s?”

“Most likely,” said Fullerton. “I never heard it myself till a day or two ago.”

“Why, what a sweep the fellow must be,” declared Driffield. “Lamont has been putting him up since Peters picked him up in the mopani veldt, nearly dead with thirst. Saved his life, in fact. I know it’s Ancram, because he pitched me the same yarn – of course ‘in strict confidence.’ Confidence indeed!”

“What a cur!” pronounced Clare. “Oh, what a completely loathsome cur!”

“Hear – hear!” ejaculated Driffield.

“Cur or not,” said Fullerton, who over and above his dislike of Lamont was naturally of a contradictory temperament, – “cur or not, the story has a good deal of bearing on what we know out here – ”

“If it’s true,” interjected Clare, with curling lips.

” – He left a kid to drown. Said he wasn’t going to risk his life for a gutter kid – and wouldn’t go in after it even when the girl he was engaged to implored him to. She called him a coward then and there, and gave him the chuck. This chap Ancram saw it all. He was there.”

“Then why didn’t he go in after it himself?” suggested Clare, with provoking pertinence.

“Says he couldn’t get there, or something. Anyway Lamont’s girl chucked him then and there. She was the daughter of some county big-wig too.”

“Of course I wasn’t there,” said Clare, “and the man who enjoyed Mr Lamont’s hospitality, as a stranger in a strange land, was. Still, I should like to hear the other side of the story.”

“What if it hasn’t got another side?” said her brother-in-law shortly.

“What if it has? Most stories have,” answered Clare sweetly.

“Anyway,” struck in Driffield, “Ancram’s no sort of chap to go around talking of other people finking. I took him on patrol with me the other day from Lamont’s. Thought he’d like to see something of the country perhaps, and the Matabele. Incidentally, Lamont lent him a horse and all he wanted for the trip. Well, the whole time the fellow was in the bluest of funks. When a lot of the people came to *indaba* us, he kept asking whether they might not mean treachery, or had arms concealed under their blankets. As to that I told him yes, and legs too.”

Clare went off into a ringing, merry peal.

“Capital!” she cried.

“Oh well – ” said Driffield, looking rather pleased.

“But he was in a terrific funk all through. The acme of it was reached the night we slept at the Umgwane drift. Ames voted him a devil of – er, I mean a superlative nuisance. He kept waking us up at all hours of the night, wanting to know if we didn’t hear anything. We had had a big *indaba* that day with Tolozi and his people, and this chump kept swearing he heard footsteps, and they must be stealing up to murder us in our sleep. I wonder if Peters had been filling him up with any yarns. But, anyhow, Ancram’s a nice sort of chap to talk about other people finking, isn’t he?”

“Why, yes,” said Clare. “But his behaviour with regard to Mr Lamont is too contemptible, spreading stories about him behind his back. Why should he do it, Mr Driffield? What on earth motive can he have?”

“Cussedness, I suppose – sheer cussedness. A good deal more mischief is made under that head than is due to mere motive, I imagine.”

“I believe so. By the way, did you persuade Mr Ames to come over for the race meeting?”

“Persuade! I tried to, Miss Vidal. But there’s no getting Ames that far out of his district unless on leave or on duty. Ames spells conscientiousness exaggerated.”

“That’s a pity,” said Clare. “He’s one of the nicest men I know.”

“Except Mr Lamont, Clare,” appended her sister mischievously.

“They’re so different. You can’t compare them,” pronounced the girl, her serenity unruffled. And then they talked of other things, and had lunch; and after a digestive smoke the two men went back to their offices – Fullerton being by profession a mining engineer.

The township of Gandela consisted of a number of zinc-roofed houses, all staringly new, straggling down what would be the main street when the town was properly laid out, but at present was only the coach road. There was a market square, with – at present – only three sides to it; an ugly red-brick building representing the magistrate’s court; ditto another, representing the Church of South Africa; a farther block somewhat more substantially built, which was the gaol, and from which not more than a dozen or so of prisoners had escaped since the place was first laid out two years previously. At a corner of the market square aforesaid stood the only hotel the place boasted, run by one Foster, to whom reference has been made; while away across the veldt, about half a mile distant, were the barracks of the Matabeleland Mounted Police, a troop of which useful force watched over the town and patrolled the neighbourhood. Scenically Gandela was prettily situated, strategically badly. It stood on a pleasant undulating plain, dotted with mimosa, but on one side dominated by a long, thickly-wooded hill called Ehlatini, the first of a range, likewise thickly-wooded, extending farther back. Well, what mattered that? The natives were thoroughly under control, men said. They had been so knocked out by the pioneer force and the Chartered Company’s Maxims during the war of occupation, that they would not be anxious to kick against the white man’s rule again in a hurry.

Would they not? We shall see.

Chapter Seven.

Fellow Travellers

“Well, good-bye, Lyall. Next time you want to do another cattle deal send me word. Only do it before the rinderpest has swept me clean. So long.”

And Lamont, swinging himself into his saddle, rode away from Lyall’s store, quite content with the price he had obtained from that worthy for a dozen young oxen, which he had delivered the day before. Moreover, he could not sufficiently congratulate himself that when he arrived home that evening he would not find Ancram.

He chuckled to himself as he thought how they had got rid of that extremely unwelcome guest. When Ancram had returned from his trip with Driffield, more jaunty than ever, Peters began to play his part, launching forth into awful and blood-curdling instances of the vindictiveness of the Matabele, and what a mistake it was that Ancram should have done anything to incur a feud that might extend through any amount of relationships. Thoroughly yet deftly did he rub it in, and soon Ancram’s nervousness reached such a pitch that he had come to regard poor Zingela – who had no more idea of cutting the strange Makiwa’s throat than he had of cutting his own – as a perfectly ferocious monster, ever on the watch for an opportunity of having his blood.

“You’ll be able to amuse yourself alone for a few days, Ancram,” Lamont had said one morning when the requisite stage of scare had been reached. “Peters and I have got to be away, but we’ll be back in a week at the outside.”

Ancram’s look of blank dismay was something to behold. Couldn’t he come, too? he asked. No, he couldn’t, because there was no spare horse that was in condition for the journey.

“But,” added Lamont consolingly, “you’ll be all right here. Zingela will look after you and show you where to find game, and so on.”

Would he indeed? thought Ancram to himself. Not if he knew it. He supposed it was with a purpose that Lamont proposed to leave him alone with this ferocious savage, to be butchered by him and his relatives – Peters had spread it on thick – but that purpose he intended to defeat. Yes, that was it. He, Ancram, was the only man in the country who knew about the Courtland affair, and of course Lamont wanted to get rid of him at all costs, now that there was another girl in the case.

“Well, old chap,” he had answered, “I think I won’t stop on. The fact is I get beastly bored all by myself, and I think you said there was a hotel in Gandela.”

“Yes. It’s not first-rate, but Foster’s a very decent fellow. If you tell him you’ve been stopping with me he’ll do his best for you,” Lamont had replied.

“But I don’t know anyone there.”

“You’ll very soon get to. There are some very good fellows in Gandela – only don’t go on the wait-to-be-introduced tack.”

Mightily did Lamont chuckle to himself over this reminiscence as he rode along, and his mirth was quite undashed by the consciousness that Ancram bore him no goodwill – and the certainty that he would injure him if he could. For this, however, he cared nothing. The Courtland story might leak out and welcome. There was no one whose opinion he valued sufficiently for it to matter. Wait. Was there not? No. There was no one.

His way lay over undulating mimosa-studded ground, beautiful but for a parched and burnt-up look, due to the prolonged drought; passing now and again a native kraal, heavily stockaded with mopani poles and thorn boughs, for lions were not altogether unknown in that part, as we have seen. A brief off-saddle for lunch, and to cool his horse’s back, and he took the track again.

Lamont was well mounted, and his steed stepped forth at a long, swift, easy walk. In the afternoon heat he became drowsy, and was soon nodding. The art of sleeping on horseback is one

that can be acquired by pressure of circumstances, and if the animal is steady in its paces, and knows its way, why, then, there is no further difficulty – and of this one both these conditions held good. Suddenly a loud whinny on its part started the rider bolt awake again.

They were now travelling down a path skirting a range of stony hills. Below, and in front at no great distance, was another horseman proceeding in the same direction. It took but one moment to determine him a white man, and not many more to overhaul him and range up alongside. The stranger was dressed in serviceable khaki and a sun-helmet, all of which was in keeping with the bronzed face and short black beard, but not altogether with the round clerical collar. Catching the sound of hoofs behind, he reined in and turned, and Lamont recognised him as Father Mathias, one of the priests attached to the Buluwayo Mission.

“Good evening, Father,” he called out, as he came up. “Rather far afield, aren’t you? This is an unexpected pleasure. I hope we are travelling the same way, because I’m already a good bit sick of my own company.”

“Mr Lamont, is it not?” said the priest, speaking with a foreign accent. “Ah yes. We met in Gandela, did we not? I too – I shall be very glad of company.”

They rode along, chatting. The while, Lamont was eyeing the other’s horse, a sorry-looking beast at best, and, besides its rider, was loaded up with a fair amount of luggage, in the shape of a large rolled valise across the horn of the saddle and a couple of well filled-out saddle-bags on each side.

“You’d better let me help you with some of that load,” he said at last. “In fact we’ll transfer the lot. My horse is as fresh as paint, and won’t feel it.”

“Oh, I could not think of letting you do that, Mr Lamont. A few pounds more or less make no great difference.”

“Don’t they? I don’t know if you have ever walked with a knapsack, Father, but I have – and it’s just that very pound or so extra that makes all the difference in the world. Are you going to ride that horse all the way to Buluwayo?”

“Yes. But I shall have a day’s rest at Skrine’s Store, where I have to look after some of our people.”

“Thirty-five miles. You will hardly get him there – certainly not to-night. You had better come home with me.”

The other feared that this was impossible, as, after they had journeyed together up to a certain point, it would be right in the contrary direction. But he ceased to combat Lamont’s offer to relieve him of some of the load.

“You don’t travel light, Father,” laughed Lamont, as he finished strapping the valise across his own saddle.

“But this is not my own luggage. I have been on a round of visitation, and wherever I find some of our people they are glad of the opportunity to hear Mass. It is the ornaments required for the Mass that are in these saddle-bags.”

“Oh, I understand now,” said Lamont. “I thought it was camping outfit. Well, that is shepherding the flock and no mistake – and that over a pretty wide run.”

“That is what we are here for, Mr Lamont. It is possible we may miss some, but we try not to.”

“I’m sure you do,” assented Lamont heartily. “Why, you are proverbial in this country as models of energy.”

“That is pleasant to know. But, speaking personally, I like the life. I am strong, and it does me no harm.”

They chatted of other things and everything. The priest was a cultured man, and as they covered mile after mile of hot, steamy Matabeleland, both he and his companion hardly noticed it, for they were back in the various centres of artistic Europe, discussing its treasures with eagerness and appreciation. They off-saddled for half an hour, then on again.

"I think we are getting near where my road turns off," said Father Mathias at last. "But, Mr Lamont, I am so glad we have been able to travel together. I have not noticed the distance at all."

Lamont cordially replied that the same held good of himself. Then, looking quickly up —

"We are going to have a change, and if it means rain — why then, hooray! Otherwise I don't like the look of it ahead — no, not at all."

In their conversation as they rode along they had, as we have said, lost sight of outside features. Now a deep, low growl of thunder recalled such. Over the range of hills they were skirting peered a ridge of black cloud, mounting higher and higher to the zenith in a huge solid pillar, spreading in black masses, lighted fitfully with the gleam of quickly successive flashes. The sun had already gone down.

"We are in for it," said Lamont, looking up. "We shall get an exemplary ducking, unless — but then you might not care about that — we were to take shelter in Zwabeka's kraal. It's only just the other side of that bend in front."

"Let us do that," said the priest. "Zwabeka is a considerable chief, is he not? I would like to see him."

"This is going to be no fool of a storm," went on Lamont, again looking upward. "The sooner we get under cover the better."

The booming growl had changed into a well-nigh unintermittent roar, as the huge cloud, towering pillar-like, now spread its black wings in a dark canopy in every direction. The horses pricked up their ears and snorted with alarm at each blinding flash. So far no rain had fallen, and there was a smell of burning in the very air.

Now a barking of dogs sounded between the rolls of thunder, and rounding a spur they came in sight of a large kraal, lying at the mouth of a lateral kloof, densely bushed and extending far up into the range of hills. The conical huts stood within the strong encircling stockade, and among them dark forms stood about in groups, gazing skyward, and indulging in deep-toned speculation as to the probability of a copious and welcome rain to relieve the parched-up and drooping crops in the lands. But the two white men, as they rode in through the still open gateway, thought to detect an unwonted sullenness instead of the cheerful greeting of welcome which should have been theirs. A ringed man came forward.

"Greeting, Gudhlusa," called out Lamont, to whom the man was known. "We would shelter, and have a talk at the same time with Zwabeka the chief. Is he in his house?"

"I see you, Lamonti. *Au!* Zwabeka? He is asleep."

"No matter. It will do when he wakes. Meanwhile we will go into a hut, for the rain will be great."

"M — 'm!" assented the bystanders in a guttural hum. "The rain will be great. Ah! ah! The rain will be great!"

There was a significance in the repetition hardly observed at the time by the new arrivals. One of them, at any rate, was to appreciate it later. To one of them, also, the utter absence of geniality on the part of the people supplied food for thought, combined too as it was with the use of his native name — in this instance a corruption of his own — instead of the more respectful '*Nkose*.' But then Zwabeka's people were mostly Abezantsi — or those of the old, pure-blooded Zulu stock, and therefore proud.

"Come this way, *Amakosi*," said the man he had addressed as Gudhlusa, pointing to a small enclosure. "We will put your horses there, and give them grain. Yonder is a new hut with the thatch but just on. There will ye rest."

"That is good, Gudhlusa," said Lamont, giving him some tobacco. "Later, when the chief is awake we will talk with him."

The new hut proved to be a very new one, which was a huge advantage in that it ensured immunity from the swarming cockroaches inseparable from old ones, and even worse. On the other hand, the thatch 'just put on,' was not as complete as it might be, for a glint of sky visible through a hole or two in the roof did not give encouraging promise of a water-tight protection from the average

thunder-shower. The saddlery and luggage was accordingly disposed in what looked likely to prove the driest side of the hut.

“Well, Father, I’m inclined to think we can see our quarters for to-night,” said Lamont cheerfully, as he filled his pipe and passed on his pouch to his companion.

“Thanks. I think so too. Well, we might do worse.”

“Oh yes. A dry camp is better than a wet one. Do you talk the Sindabele?”

“A little. Enough to make myself understood for the ordinary purposes. But I am learning it. You seem to have got it well, though.”

“I wish I had it better. You see I am a bit interested in these people. They – and their history – appeal to me. Poor devils! I can’t help sympathising with them to a certain extent. It must be rotten hard luck for a lot of these older ones, like Zwabeka for instance, who have been big-wigs in their time, having to knuckle down to a new and strange form of government in which they come out very under-dog indeed. Still, it’s the universal law and there’s no help for it. But – I’m sorry for them for all that.”

Could he have seen what was in Zwabeka’s mind, – Zwabeka, nominally asleep in one of the huts a few yards away, – could he have heard what was on Zwabeka’s tongue, yea, at that very moment, where would his sympathy have been? The course of but a few days was destined to change it, like that of many another who desired to treat the conquered race with fairness and consideration, and who like himself were sitting on the brink of the hitherto quiescent vent of a raging volcano.

Chapter Eight.

Zwabeka's Kraal

"Isn't that a perfect picture of savage life, set in a savage surrounding?" said Lamont, as he stood with his travelling companion before the door of the hut allotted to them. "It is artistically complete."

"It is indeed," was the answer.

And it was. The circle of the kraal, with its great open space and the conical huts, four deep, ringing it in: the dark, lithe forms of its occupants, unclothed save for a *mútya* of dangling monkey skins; or in the case of the women a greasy hide apron: the sinuous movements as the young men and boys ran in and out among the multi-coloured cattle: the reek of smoke and kine: the wild background of wooded ridge and craggy rock, and the swirling streamers of the storm-cloud above, pouring forth jetty beams of steely blue light and reverberating roll against the bushy spurs and darksome recesses. All this in the fast-gathering dusk made up a picture of sombre, impressive grandeur, the very soul of which seemed to permeate the minds of its two civilised spectators.

Then the full force of the storm broke overhead, and it was as though the whole world were on fire, and split in twain; what with the unintermittent electric glare, and the ear-splitting crashes, hardly more intermittent. But, with it all, not a drop of rain.

"It's grand; but I've a notion it's beastly dangerous," said Lamont. "We'd better get inside. There's more electricity in us than in a roof. They say," he went on, as they gained their shelter, "that dry storms are more dangerous than when it rains, but that may be a popular superstition. Anyway everyone doesn't share it, for here's somebody coming."

Even as he spoke, there crept through the low doorway, which had been left open, a young man followed by two girls, one bearing a basket of green mealies roasted on the ashes, the other a large bowl of *tywala*. The youth explained that they were sent by Gudhlusa, who was sorry he could not send meat, but the people were poor, since Government and the pestilence had killed all their cattle, and they had no meat.

"We shall do famously," said Lamont. Then to the young man: "We thank Gudhlusa. And thou, *umfane*, make ready and broil these birds for us. Here is of the white man's money; for thyself."

"*Nkose!*" cried the youth delightedly, taking up the two francolins. "It shall be done. My father, Gudhlusa, also said that the chief, Zwabeka, is not able to see and talk with the *Amakosi*

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