

Mitford Bertram

Aletta: A Tale of the Boer Invasion



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Содержание

Chapter One.	5
Chapter Two.	10
Chapter Three.	14
Chapter Four.	18
Chapter Five.	22
Chapter Six.	27
Chapter Seven.	31
Chapter Eight.	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	37

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Chapter One.

Book I – The Transvaal Emissary

The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast.

The long room was packed full – full of male Boers of all ages: that is to say, from those in earliest manhood to the white-bearded great-grandfathers of the community – Boers of every type, Boers hairy, Boers shaven, moleskin-clad and collarless Boers, and Boers got up with near approach to European neatness; Boers small, dark, and wiry, still, after generations, preserving the outward characteristics of their Huguenot and French ancestry; Boers tall, large-limbed, fair, of Saxon aspect and descent.

What sitting accommodation the room held was absorbed by the older of those present, for the patriarchal tradition is very strong among that old-world and conservative race. The residue stood in a closely packed mass, literally hanging on the words of the orator.

The latter was a tall, elderly man, all fire and energy both as to speech and words. His face, strong and bronzed and lined, was of the Roman type, and the brown of his short beard was just beginning to show threads of grey. Standing there in his suit of black broadcloth, his sinewy figure seemed hardly in keeping with such attire. It seemed to demand the easier and more picturesque hunting costume of the veldt. Andries Erasmus Botma was his name, and he ranked among his fellow-countrymen as a “Patriot,” second to none as deserving their closest attention and deepest veneration.

On the table before him stood two lighted candles, throwing out the lines of his strong, rugged countenance, and between them a ponderous Dutch Bible, upon the closed cover of which one great hand constantly rested. On one side of him sat “Mynheer,” as the local *predikant*, or minister, is commonly known among his flock; on the other Jan Marthinus Grobbelaar – or Swaart Jan, as he was popularly termed – the owner of the farm on which the gathering was taking place. The minister was a puffy, consequential-looking man, with long, shaven upper lip and a light beard cut after the pattern of that worn by the world-famed President, a white tie, reaching nearly from shoulder to shoulder, standing aggressively forth from the clerical black. The farmer was a wizened individual, with a pronounced stoop, and, at first sight, of retiring temperament; but a long nose and deep-set eyes, together with two teeth projecting tusk-like from each corner of the mouth out upon a lank, grizzled beard, imparted to him an utterly knowing and foxy aspect, in keeping with the reputation “Swaart Jan” actually held among his kinsfolk and acquaintance.

The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast. The meeting, which had opened with long prayer by the *predikant* and a long speech of introduction and welcome from Swaart Jan Grobbelaar, was now just beginning to become of intense interest – to the meeting itself. Beginning far back, with the insurrection under Adrian van Jaarsveldt and the capitulation of the Cape by General Janssens, the orator had hitherto been rather academical. Even the emancipation of the slaves, with its wholly farcical system of compensation, did not appeal over much to a younger generation, to whom it was all ancient history of rather too ancient date. But when he came to the Slagter’s Nek tragedy, he had got his finger on a chord that would never cease to vibrate. The tense attitude of his listeners was that of one mind, of one understanding.

“Brothers,” he went on. “Brothers – and sons – for many are here to-night who are the men of the future – the men of the very near future – to whom the one long life-struggle of their fathers in days of old is but a name; to whom, however, the righting of the wrongs of their fathers is bequeathed;

to whom life – yea, even life itself, has been given and allowed by the Lord above that they may carry out the solemn bequest of righteous vengeance which their fathers have handed down to them; that they may have ever before them, ever in their thoughts, the deliverance of this their dear land, their splendid fatherland, from the hated English yoke. You then – you younger men especially – stand up day by day and bless God for the noble privilege which is yours, the privilege of the patriot, of the man who sacrifices all, worldly possessions, even life itself, for the sake of his beloved fatherland. Not many days since I stood upon that spot, that holy ground, where five of your fathers were cruelly done to death for no other crime than repudiating the rule of a bloody-minded king, an English king who was not their king, whose sovereignty they had never owned. There they were hung up to the infamous gallows where they died the most ignominious of deaths, with every circumstance of barbarity which could have been practised by the savage heathen against whom they have ever striven. Standing upon that spot I could see the whole of it again. I could see those five men hauled beneath the English gallows-tree, I could see the brave and noble fortitude wherewith they went to their death. I could see the weeping crowd of their fellow-countrymen – of Our fellow-countrymen – and women – gathered to witness their sufferings. And the five patriots – the five martyrs – were dragged up by ropes to their doom. But, brothers, God intervened. Heaven intervened. Even as the lions' mouths were shut to Daniel – as the fiery furnace kindled by the idolatrous king passed over the three servants of God unhurt – even so Heaven intervened to render the slaughter instruments of the cruel English king of no effect. The apparatus of death gave way, and the five patriot martyrs fell to the earth unharmed. What then? What then, sons and descendants of those great ones? Did the English recognise the hand of God? Did they recognise that even their puny mockery of justice had to bow before the manifestation of His will? They did not. In the face of the tears and supplications and bitter grief of those who beheld; of those in whose veins ran the blood of the martyred men, those five patriots were once more put through the bitterness of death. This time Heaven did not intervene. And why? In order that the death agonies of those tortured patriots should be held in remembrance; that they should be ever before the eyes of their descendants as an earnest of the death agonies of the hated and hateful race which was their oppressor and is ours. Brothers, I stood upon that ground, that very spot, that holy ground, and I prayed and gained strength that I might fulfil the purpose for which I am here. Slagter's Nek! The infamous name which was given to that holy spot has gone down to generations in its infamy, and ever will. Is there here a Bezuidenhout, is there a Meyer, is there a Faber, is there a Snyman – yea, and I could name a score of others, a hundred others, a thousand others – in the veins of whom runs the blood of the patriot martyrs? Let them not forget the English butchery of Slagter's Nek; then, when their rifles are pointing straight, let their watchword be 'Slagter's Nek'!"

The speaker paused. Utterly carried away by his own feeling; his whole frame was in a quiver. His eyes were flashing, and the sinews of his great hand resting upon the holy volume leapt out into knots. The *predikant*, seated at his right, poured out a glass of water from an earthenware carafe on the table, and thrust it into his hand, and he swallowed the contents as with an effort, and in choking gulps. The effect upon the audience was marvellous. Thoroughly overawed, its feeling was expressed by exclamations deep rather than loud, and several of the old men present uncovered – for all wore their hats except the orator himself – and mumbled a fervid prayer. The fact that the historical tragedy had been enacted eighty-three years previously was quite lost to view. It might have taken place yesterday for the effect the recalling of it produced upon the gathering.

The orator proceeded. He drew vivid pictures of the exodus of the original Dutch settlers, sacrificing all to be free from the hated English rule; of their intrepid and simple and God-fearing lives; of their daily hardships and toil; of their peril at the hands of fierce and warlike tribes; and while setting forth their endurance and heroism, he never wandered far from the main point, the text of his whole discourse – viz. how all that their fathers, the old Voortrekkers, had to endure was the outcome of the oppressive rapacity of the English yoke. The myrmidons of England would not leave them in peace and quietness even when they had avenged the bloodshed and treachery of the Zulu

despot, and had reason to believe they had at last found the land of promise. Let them look at Natal to-day. They, the Dutch, had bought it from Dingane, and had occupied it. But the English had come and had seized it from them, had robbed them of the fruit of their labours and of their toil, and of their outpoured blood. Let them look at the Transvaal of to-day. It was the same there. A horde of English bloodsuckers had poured in, fevered by the lust of gold, and still more and more, until the land was overrun by them, as the land of Pharaoh under the plague of locusts. And not only that, but they had brought with them every life and soul destroying vice which Satan and his hell-kingdom, Europe, could bring to bear to contaminate and utterly corrupt a God-fearing people.

The speaker went on to portray in lurid colours the vices of Johannesburg, a town, he put it, purely English, which those emissaries of Satan had raised in their midst, contriving to put his finger, with considerable native astuteness, on the darker spots inseparable from the advance of European methods and progress. He further drew contrasts between the simple life of the young Boer of a quarter of a century back, and the smart, educated, English-speaking, English-dressing, young Boer up to date, so vivid and so little to the advantage of the latter, as to cause several there present perceptibly to wince.

“Brothers,” he went on, “the time for purging away these iniquities is at hand. The eye of God is ever upon His people, and His wrath upon their oppressors. Who turned back England’s might, now nineteen years ago? Who turned the hearts of her trained and drilled soldiers into water, so that they fled down the sides of Majuba like hunted bucks before us – before a few farmers, whom they despised as so many ignorant Boers? Who smote them hip and thigh at Schuins Hoogte, and, indeed, everywhere, down to the wicked attempt upon our land – our beloved land, two years ago? Not the arm of our brave burghers, but the arm of the Lord. His arm brought us in triumph forth from the midst of our enemies, and assured our peace and safety, and prosperity, in the land wherein we dwell. And as the might of the Lord was over us then, so is it now. England may send out her ships, as she is doing – may pour her soldiers into our land, as she is doing – may threaten our noble President, as she is doing – but what is that to us? When a nation, a God-fearing nation, is in peril, God will raise up for that nation a deliverer. He has raised up one for this nation, and the name of that deliverer is Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger.”

The roar of applause which went up at the mention of the great name – held in veneration by every Dutchman from the Zambesi to Cape Agulhas – would have drowned the speaker’s voice, even if he had not been sufficiently master of his craft to pause in order to allow this touch to have its full effect. It was long before he could continue, and then with his right hand impressively laid upon the holy book before him, he thundered forth a volley of passages therefrom, deftly applied so as to work upon his audience, in such wise that many among it were by no means sure that the President of the South African Republic was not actually mentioned by name therein, while a few were quite certain he was. The whole constituted a strange and instructive scene, for these enthusiasts were, with the exception of the orator himself, all British subjects, dwelling and prospering within a British colony, enjoying a responsible government and equal rights and representation for all.

At length arose shouts for order and silence, and the speaker was able to resume:

“Brothers, I have heard it said that ye are our brethren no more; that we of the two Republics are of another nation, of a different blood; that you on this side of the Groote Rivier have become English now – ”

“*Nee, nee!*” burst from the audience, in roaring negative.

” – That you will not raise a rifle in the holy cause of your brethren, I believe it not. Our watchword is not ‘Africa for the Transvaal,’ or ‘Africa for the Free State,’ but ‘Africa for the Afrikanders.’”

Again a shout of acclamation greeted the words.

“Brothers, I have been in England; I have seen her millions of people, her splendour, and her enormous wealth. But I have seen more. I have seen her weakness. I have seen her large cities, and

their vice and squalor. I have seen the frivolous luxury of her rich, and the hideous misery and want and desperation of her poor; and I tell you that for all her outward strength she is a weak nation, a rotten nation, with all her best blood poisoned by disease, and her common blood turned to water by foul air and hunger and drunkenness. And this is the nation which is greedy for our land, is ravening to steal the gold which it contains.” Then, raising his powerful voice to thunder pitch: “Brothers, shall this go on? Now, nay, it shall not, I tell you. All is in readiness. For years *we* have been in readiness, increasing our armed might, and now we are ready to strike – to strike with a force and terror that shall amaze the whole world. Be in readiness, too, brave burghers, patriots all; and to deliver this message to you am I here to-night God does not will that this rotten, frivolous, and enfeebled nation shall rule over you any longer. Be ready, for the day is at hand. ‘Africa for the Afrikanders!’ is our watchword, and the flag that shall wave over that United Africa is this.”

With the celerity of a conjurer he produced the four-coloured flag of the Transvaal Republic, and with one fierce jerk of the hand unfurling it, he waved it above his head. Instantly every hat was off, and round after round of deafening cheering hailed the symbol. Then, led by the emissary himself, the whole assembly struck up the “Volklied,” the national hymn of the Transvaal, roaring it forth in a manner that left nothing to be desired in the way of fervour, but much in the way of time and tune, and which must have impressed the numerous baboons infesting the crags and kranzes of the surrounding Wildschutsbergen with the instinct that it was high time to quit that section of country, never to return.

When the singing and cheering had subsided the emissary invited any of those present to express their opinions, but few cared to do so. One or two of the old men got up, but their remarks were mere quavering comments – interspersed with pious aspirations – upon all that the speaker had said, and fell woefully flat after the fiery periods and power of eloquence of the delegate from Pretoria. And the secret of that power lay in the fact that the man was so terribly in earnest. No timeserving, self-seeking stump-agitator was Andries Botma. Every word he uttered he implicitly believed, and that the whole Dutch race in South Africa were under special Divine protection, and the Anglo-Saxon under the Divine curse, he no more doubted than that the sky was above and the earth beneath. Though a hopelessly fanatical patriot, he was essentially an honest one, and this his hearers knew.

The *predikant* having made a speech to high Heaven, in the guise of a long prayer thoroughly in accordance with the prevailing sentiment of the meeting, the latter broke up. A few, mostly the older men, remained behind, talking over the ideas they had just heard with all seriousness, but most of them had crowded into another room where Vrouw Grobbelaar, aided by her trio of fine and rather pretty daughters, was dispensing coffee and other refreshment. These, too, were talking over the situation, but with a breezy boisterousness which was absent in their elders.

“It’s coming now, Tanta, it’s coming now,” cried one young fellow, thrusting his way to the front. The old lady looked at him across the table.

“What is coming now?” she repeated shortly – a way she had with those of the speaker’s age and type.

“Why, the war, of course. We are going to drive the English out of the country. The Patriot says so.”

The old lady snorted.

“*You* look like driving anybody out of the country, Theunis Venter, even the English. You’d be afraid to lie behind an antheap waiting to shoot *rooi-baatjes* for fear of spoiling that pretty waistcoat of yours” – looking him up and down contemptuously. “And his tight riding-breeches – oh! – oh! wouldn’t they split? And the rings! And yet you don’t look like an Englishman, Theunis, not even in your grand English clothes.”

A roar of applause and derision from that section of her hearers which had not enjoyed the advantage of a South African College education and a parent with advanced ideas and generous bank-balance greeted the old woman’s scoffing words.

“*Ja, Ja*, Theunis, that is just what the Patriot said,” they chorussed. But the young fellow looked sulky – very much so. He was one of that type of young Boer who no longer thinks it the mark of a man and a patriot to sleep in his clothes and wear his hat in the house. Nor was he the only one of that type there present. Others took his side, and hurled corresponding gibes at the conservative party, and the uproar became simply deafening, all talking and bellowing at once.

But if it be imagined that this turn of affairs caused the slightest uneasiness or alarm to the fair sex as there represented, the notion can be dismissed forthwith. There was a twinkle of mirth in the old lady’s eyes which belied the sardonic droop of her mouth, and as for the girls they looked as placid and unconcerned as though some thirty odd infuriated males were not bawling the very house down within a couple of yards of them.

“There – there!” sang out Vrouw Grobbelaar when she had had enough of it. “Make not such a row, for dear Heaven’s sake! Theunis, you are not such a bad sort of boy after all, for all your trimmed moustache and English clothes. Hendrina, give him a *soepje*– that is to say, if he does not turn up his nose at the good liquor his father drank before him. I’m told that the English get drunk on stuff made from smoked wood, down in Cape Town. Only one, though – I won’t encourage young men to drink, but the night is cold, and he has a long way to ride. After all, it isn’t his fault they tried to make an Englishman of him.”

Boer brandy, when pure and well matured, is about the best liquor in the world, and this was the best of its kind; wherefore under its influence, aided by the smiles of the ministering Hendrina, the youth’s ruffled feathers were soon smoothed down, and three or four of his sympathisers claiming to join in the privilege, good-humour was restored and plenty of mirth and good-fellowship prevailed before they separated for their long ride home over the moonlit veldt; for Boers are by nature sociable folk among themselves, and the younger ones, at any rate, addicted to chaff and practical joking.

In the other room, where refreshment had been taken in for their physical weal, sat the more serious-minded.

“Jan,” said Andries Botma, turning to his host, “where is Stephanus De la Rey? Is he sick?”

“No!”

“Why is he not here to-night?”

Swaart Jan shrugged his shoulders and grinned, his two tusks protruding more than ever.

“How do I know, brother? Only we must not forget that his wife is half an Englishwoman.”

“Ah!” said the delegate, who appeared to be struck with the idea.

“Oom Stephanus would not come,” put in a young man reverentially. “That is all I know about it.”

The speaker had been one of the most fervid listeners to the “Patriot’s” discourse, and with much trepidation had lingered behind among his elders, preferring their conversation to the boisterous merriment in the other room.

“It is Stephanus’ nephew, Adrian De la Rey,” said Jan Grobbelaar.

“Ah! a good name. A good name,” declared the delegate. “Bear it worthily, nephew, when the time comes.” Then, turning to the *predikant*, “We must win over Stephanus De la Rey, Mynheer. We must win him over.”

“He is the only ‘good’ man here whom we have not won,” was the reply, given dubiously.

“*Ja, ja!*” assented Swaart Jan, shaking his head softly. “*Ja, ja!* we must win over Stephanus De la Rey.”

Chapter Two. Sidelights

Down by the river bed a girl was standing. The river bed was dry. So, too, was the wide, flat expanse of veldt stretching before and around her, and the slopes of two low cliff-crowned mountains which at some distance off relieved the dead level of the arid plain were brown where they should have been green. The only green spot visible upon the whole landscape was formed by an extensive cultivated patch lying around a farmhouse half a mile away, and this was the result of irrigation, not of the opening of the windows of heaven. But, although the sun shone down from a cloudless sky in the full glory of his midday splendour, his rays were without power, for there was a keen icy edge upon the air, stirred by a light breeze that was suggestive of exhilaration combined with warm clothing, and imparted a very entrancing touch of additional colour to the cheeks of the girl standing there.

She is a pretty girl, the large pupils of whose blue eyes lend to those attractive orbs a velvety softness which is in strange contradiction to the firm cut of the chin and the full though decided lips. She is of medium height, and her well-rounded figure is arrayed in a blouse and skirt, about as neat and serviceable a form of feminine attire as exists – on the veldt or elsewhere; but her hair, wavy and golden, is, save for a rebellious lock or two over the forehead, concealed within an ample white *kapje*, or sunbonnet – so becoming a framework to a pretty face.

Standing there among the dry mimosa bushes which fringe the river bank, her eyes wander meditatively forth over the brown and treeless plains beyond. Here and there, black dots moving near or far represent the staple wealth of that section of country, in the shape of male ostriches in full plumage, and now and again the stillness is broken by a triple booming, as that most truculent of bipeds lifts up his voice; but these are everyday sights and sounds and of them the girl takes not the smallest notice, nor yet of the antics of one great savage bird, who, with all his jetty plumage bristling in wrath, towers up to a formidable height as he presses against the wires of the dividing fence in his futile efforts to reach her and kick her into smithereens.

Suddenly her eyes dilate and she gives a slight start – even losing a little of her colour. For this yon black demon stalking up and down in impotent menace but a few yards off is in no wise responsible. The fence will take care of him. Can such an effect be produced by the sight of that tourniquet of dust, far away over the plain, yet whirling nearer and nearer? Perchance, for no mere erratic “dust-devil” is yonder cloud. It is raised by the hoofs of a horse.

Yet no assignation is this. Not for the purpose of meeting anybody is this girl here to-day. For all that her breast heaves somewhat, and her forsaking colour returns with a little more added as she glances round nervously towards the farmhouse, and finds herself wishing she had on headgear less conspicuous than the snowy whiteness of a *kapje*.

On comes the dust-cloud, powdering up from the road at each hoof-stroke as the horseman advances at a canter. He, whoever it may be, is yet a great way off, and a speculation, in which hope is about equal to disappointment and disgust combined, escapes those pretty lips:

“Only some Dutchman, I suppose.”

But a very few minutes of further watching suffices to bring back the light to her face, and an eager, expectant look, which she strives to repress, shines from her eyes. For the rider is very near now, and instinctively she moves a little further down the river bank in such wise that the dip in the ground where the drift lies conceals her effectually, white *kapje* and all, from view of the homestead.

The horseman, who is now descending into the drift, perceives her and turns his steed, so as to join her among the thorns.

“Why, May, this is good of you,” he says, as he joins her. Seen dismounted he is a tall, well-set-up man of about five-and-thirty, with clean-cut features and a dark moustache. His brown eyes

are clear and searching, and there is a certain quickness about his speech and movements which is totally disassociated with any suggestion of flurry.

“What is ‘good of’ me? You don’t suppose I came down here on purpose to meet you, I hope?” is the characteristic rejoinder, uttered with a certain tinge of defiance.

“Why not? It would have been very nice of you – very sweet of you, in fact, and I should have appreciated it. Don’t you run away with the idea that the faculty of appreciation is exclusively vested in the softer sex.”

They were still holding each other’s hands – holding them a good deal longer than the usages of social greeting exacted.

“Well, I’m glad I came, anyhow,” she answered, in a softer tone, relaxing her grasp of his with ever so perceptible a final pressure. “The slowness of this place gets upon my nerves.”

“You’ve spoilt it now,” he laughed, looking her in the eyes. “For penalty you deserve what I’m about to tell you. I haven’t time to off-saddle. I’m going straight on.”

She started. The bright face clouded over. The new arrival, who had never removed his eyes from it, needed all his self-command to refrain from an uncontrollable burst of merriment.

“If you pass our door to-day or any other day without off-saddling I’ll never speak to you again,” she declared.

“Why should I not when you indignantly vow you would not come this little way to meet me?” he rejoined, still with a faint smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

“You know I would,” she flashed forth impulsively. “Don’t be horrid, Colvin! I didn’t, exactly come to meet you, but I did walk down here on the – offchance that – that you might be coming. There. Why is it that you always make me say everything right out – things I don’t in the least want to say? Nobody else could. Yet you do.”

For answer Colvin Kershaw deliberately placed one arm around the speaker, and, lifting her face with his other hand, kissed her on the lips. He did not hurry over the process either, nor did she seem anxious that he should. Yet these two were not lovers in the recognised and affianced sense of the term.

“How pretty you look in that white *kapje!*” he said, as he released her. “It suits you so well. If it hadn’t been for the glint of the white catching my eye I believe I should have passed you without seeing. And of course you would have let me?”

“Of course I should. But we had better go back to the house now, because if Frank or mother saw you ride down to the drift, they will be wondering how it is you are so long in getting to the other side. Come!”

They strolled up the stony river bank together, he leading his horse. But a sort of constraint fell upon the girl as they drew near the house. She had noticed her mother looking at her strangely of late when the talk had turned upon the man now at her side. He, for his part, felt no constraint at all. In point of fact, he never did.

No dogs heralded their approach with loud-mouthed clamour. No self-respecting dog given to erratic movement, and poking his nose into every corner where he should not, could live a day on a well-organised ostrich farm by reason of the poisoned morsels – carefully planted out of the way of the birds themselves – wherewith the run is strewn; for the benefit of cats and jackals, and leopards. One ancient and wheezy cur, however, incapable of any lengthier peregrination than a hundred yards, greeted their approach with sepulchral barks, and behind it came the owner, with his coat half on half off.

“Hallo, Colvin!” he sang out. “Why, you’re quite a stranger these days. Haven’t been here for weeks. Plotting treason with your friends the Dutchmen, I believe?”

“That’s it, Frank. We’re going to hold your place up for arms and ammunition first thing. Then they’re going to make me State Secretary of the new Cape Colony Republic on condition I do the shooting of you with my own hand. So now you’re warned.”

The point of these amenities lay in the fact that Colvin Kershaw was not without pronounced Dutch sympathies at a time of strong political tension. Whereas Frank Wenlock, though on good enough terms with his Dutch neighbours individually, was one of those not uncommon types who labour under a firm conviction that the Powers above built this planet Earth primarily for the benefit of – and eventually to be solely and absolutely ruled from north to south, and from east to west by – England, and England only.

Personally considered Frank Wenlock was a presentable young fellow enough. Externally of medium height, strong and energetic, his face, lighted up by a pair of blue eyes not unlike those of his sister, though not handsome, was open and pleasing. In character, though somewhat quick-tempered, he was the soul of good-nature, but withal no part of a fool. He and Colvin Kershaw had been fellow-pioneers together in Rhodesia, and had fought side by side throughout the grim struggle of the Matabele rebellion.

“Now, Mr Kershaw, can’t you and Frank get together for a moment without fighting about the Boers?” interrupted a brisk, not unpleasing, and yet not altogether refined voice. “But where did you pick up May?”

Colvin turned to greet its owner; a well-preserved, middle-aged woman, not so many years his senior, good-looking too, after a fine, fresh, healthy type.

“Oh, we haven’t begun upon them yet, Mrs Wenlock,” he replied, ignoring the last query. “We’ll worry that out after dinner.”

“You’re not going on to-night?”

“Yes, I must I want to get to Stephanus De la Rey’s. There’s a joker there I want to meet.”

“Is that the Transvaal emissary?” said Frank, looking up quickly from his plate, for they had sat down to dinner.

“I suppose that’s what you’d call him. But, do you know, all this rather interests me. I like to hear all there is to be said on both sides.”

“Why they’ll hold a meeting and simply spout treason all night,” rejoined Frank vehemently. “Good Lord, if I were Milner, I’d have that fellow arrested and shot as a spy.”

“My dear chap, you can’t shoot ‘spies’ when we are not at war with anybody, and Botma, I suppose, has about as much right to hold a meeting among his countrymen here as a British labour delegate has to organise a strike. These are among the advantages of a free country, don’t you know?”

“Did you come straight here from your place to-day?” said Mrs Wenlock, by way of covering the angry growl with which her son had received the other’s words.

“No. I slept at Swaart Jan Grobbelaar’s.”

“That’s the old buck who brought away a lot of British skulls from Majuba,” burst in Frank. “They say he sticks one up at a couple of hundred yards every Majuba Day, and practises at it until there isn’t a bit left big enough for a bullet to hit.”

“He must have brought away about a waggonload of them, then, considering that Majuba happened eighteen years ago,” said Colvin. “But I don’t know that it isn’t all a yarn. People will say anything about each other just now.”

“I hear there’s a lot of war-talk among the Dutch in the Wildschutsbergen now, Mr Kershaw,” said Mrs Wenlock. “You must hear it, because you’re right in among them all.”

“Oh, they talk a good bit about war, but then what do we do? When I was down at the Port Elizabeth show all the English were busy taking the Transvaal. It was the same thing along Fish River and Koonap. If two or three fellows got together on any given farm they were bound to spend the evening taking the Transvaal. In fact, no Boer could give a shoot on his place without his English neighbours swearing he was rifle-practising for the great upheaval. We talk nothing but the war, but if the Dutchmen do it becomes menace, sedition, and all the rest of it right away.”

Those were the days subsequent to the failure of the Bloemfontein Conference, and racial feeling was near attaining its highest pitch. Frank Wenlock, as we have said, got on with his Dutch

neighbours more than passably, which was as well, considering that his English ones were but few and at long distances apart. But even upon him the curse of a far-off dissension had fallen. Colvin Kershaw, on the other hand, was a man of the world, with a well-balanced mind, and somewhat unconventional withal. He took a judicial view of the situation, and, while recognising that it had two sides, and that there was a great deal to be said for both, he distinctly declined to allow any political considerations to make any difference to the relationship in which he stood towards his Boer neighbours and their families, with several of whom he was on very good terms indeed.

A wild effort was made to abandon the burning subject, and for awhile, as they sat upon the stoep smoking their pipes – the conversation ran upon stock and local interests, and the prospects of rain to carry them through the winter. But it soon came round again, as, indeed, in those days it was bound to do, and the hotter and hotter grew Frank Wenlock on the subject, the cooler and cooler remained his opponent. May, for her part, sat and listened. She mostly shared her brother's prejudices on that particular subject; but here was one whose opinion on most subjects she held in the highest regard. Clearly, then, there was something to be said on the other side.

"Why need you go on to-night, Mr Kershaw?" struck in Mrs Wenlock. "Your room is always ready, you know, and it's quite a long while since you were here."

"It won't be so long again, Mrs Wenlock. But I must be at Stephanus De la Rey's to-night, because, over and above the delegate, I made an appointment with Piet Lombard over a stock deal."

"Not to mention other attractions," cut in May, with a mischievous look in her blue eyes. "Which is the favoured one – Andrina or Condaas?"

"How can one presume upon a choice between two such dreams of loveliness? Both, of course," was the mirthful rejoinder. But there was no real merriment in the mind of the girl. She had hoped he would stay, had mapped out a potential afternoon's stroll – it might be, by great good luck, the two of them alone together. And things were so slow, and times so dull, there where they saw no one month in month out, save an occasional Boer passer-by, or a travelling *smaus*, or feather-buyer, usually of a tolerably low type of Jew – and therefore, socially, no acquisition. Yes, after all, that was it. Times were so dull.

"Don't be so long finding your way over again," was the chorus of God-speed which followed the departing guest as his steed ambled away.

He, for his part, seemed to find a good deal to think about as he held on over the wide brown plains, dismounting absently to let himself through a gate every few minutes, for the whole veldt was a network of wire fencing. Ostriches, grazing, lifted their long necks, some in half-frightened, some in half-truculent curiosity, to gaze at him, then dropped them again to resume their picking at the dried sprigs of Karroo bush.

His acquaintance with the Wenlocks dated from just a year back: with the family that is, for he and Frank had, as we have said, campaigned together in Rhodesia. On returning to the Colony at the close of the rebellion he had come to visit his former comrade-in-arms at the latter's own home, and had spent three months there while looking about for a place of his own. He had soon found one to his liking, and now owned a 5,000-morgen farm in the Wildschutsberg range, where report said he got through more game-shooting than farming. If so, it didn't seem to matter greatly, for Colvin Kershaw was one of those phenomena occasionally encountered – an habitually lucky man. What he undertook in a small and careless way was wont to turn out better results than ten times the carefully prepared labour and forethought exercised by other people. Furthermore he was uncommunicative as to his own affairs, and whatever was known about him among his neighbours amounted to just nothing at all.

"Come again soon," had been May's parting words, and the blue eyes uplifted to his during that last handclasp had been wondrously soft and appealing.

Was it upon this his thoughts were dwelling so intently as he rode along mile after mile? Perhaps. Yet he had often bidden her farewell before.

Chapter Three.

A Boer Farm

Ratels Hoek, the farm owned by Stephanus De la Rey, was situated in a broad, open basin, surrounded by the craggy, cliff-crowned hills of the Wildschutsberg range.

It was a prosperous-looking place. The homestead was large and roomy, and not unpicturesque, with its deep verandah shaded by growing creepers, which, however, at that time of year were destitute of leafage. A well-kept flower garden, which was a blaze of bright colour in good seasons, went round two sides of the house, and behind, abundant stabling and shearing sheds and kraals and dipping tank testified to the up-to-date ideas and enterprise of its owner. Beyond these again large patches of cultivated lands, shut in by high quince hedges, sloped down to the Sneeuw River, which took its rise in the Wildschutsberg, and which, normally dry or the merest trickle, could roar down in a terrific torrent at very short notice what time thunderstorms were heavy and frequent in the mountains beyond. Away over the veldt, which, until joining the grassy slopes of the surrounding heights, was gently undulating and fairly covered with mimosa bush, ostriches grazed, or stalked defiantly up and down the wire fencing which divided one large “camp” from another.

If Ratels Hoek was a creditable example of the better class of Dutch farm, no less was its owner an excellent specimen of the better type of Dutch farmer. Stephanus De la Rey was a tall, handsome man of about fifty. He had a fine forehead, blue eyes, and straight, regular features, and the masses of his full brown beard had hardly yet begun to show threads of grey. His character was in keeping with his general appearance, for though quiet-mannered, he was the most straight forward and genial of men, and was immensely looked up to and respected far and wide by such few English as the neighbourhood contained, no less than by his own compatriots.

His wife was a bright, cheerful, brisk-mannered little woman, who, as we have already heard it stated, was half English in that she had owned an English mother. Their family consisted of a liberal eight, of which those now at home represented the younger two of each sex.

Stephanus De la Rey was seated on his stoep, smoking a meditative pipe and thinking deeply. He had just been reading the newspapers, and there was enough in them at that time to give a thoughtful man plenty to think about. His own sympathies were not unnaturally with the Transvaal, where two of his sons had settled, and for its President he entertained a very warm admiration. But he was no fiery patriot. War was a terrible thing, and war between two white nations – two Christian nations, in a land swarming with heathen barbarians – seemed to him hardly justifiable under any circumstances whatever. Even if the worst came to the worst, let the Republic fight its own battles. He and his neighbours had no grievance against the English Government under which they dwelt – save grievances which were purely sentimental and belonging to ancient history; and as he gazed around upon his own prosperous lands the gravity of his thoughts deepened. This was momentarily diverted by the approach of two of his sons – who had just come in from the veldt – tall, light-haired, quiet-looking youths of two- and three-and-twenty respectively. They seemed to be under the influence of some unwonted excitement.

“We heard some news to-day, Pa,” said the elder of the two. “We are to have a visitor to-night. Who do you think it is?”

“I cannot guess. Who is it?”

“The Patriot,” burst forth the other. “*Ja*, that is good! I have wanted so much to see him.”

Both looked furtively at each other and then at their father. The latter did not seem overjoyed at the news. In point of fact he was not. Personally the presence in his house of the Transvaal delegate would have afforded him the keenest gratification but that he knew as surely as though he had been told that the latter’s visit would be purely of a political nature, and Stephanus De la Rey preferred

to leave politics severely alone. Not only that, but that his own conversion to the ranks of the secret agitators was the motive of the visit he more than suspected.

“Where did you hear that, Jan?” he said.

“Adrian told us, Pa. We saw him as we passed Friedrik Schoemann’s. He is coming up to-night too. *Ja!* you should hear him talk of the Patriot. He heard him two nights ago at Jan Grobbelaar’s. The Patriot spoke to him too – to him, Adrian. He says in a month or two we shall have driven all the English out of the country. See, Cornelis,” turning to his brother, “I wonder if that second post from the gate away yonder were an Englishman how long it would be standing there,” and he levelled his long Martini as though to put the matter to the test. But the reply which this demonstration elicited from their habitually easy-going and indulgent father both surprised and startled the two youths, and that mightily.

“Are you not ashamed of yourself, Jan, to stand there before me and talk such wicked nonsense? Is that the sort of Christianity the teaching of Mynheer, as well as of your own parents, has implanted in you, that you can talk about shooting men – Christian men like ourselves, remember – as you would talk of shooting buck? I have nothing to do with Adrian’s movements or ideas, although he is my nephew, but I have with yours; so listen to me. There is a great deal of wild talk being flung around just now, but I wish you to have nothing to do with it. Of course you cannot help hearing it from time to time, there is too much of it everywhere unfortunately; but I enjoin you not to take part in it. It is shameful the light way in which such weighty and serious subjects are discussed. When our fathers took up arms to defend their rights and liberties and their lives they did so prayerfully and with the full weight of their solemn responsibilities, and that is why they were victorious. But now such matters are bragged and chattered about by a herd of thoughtless boys. Leave them alone. The times are quite troublous enough, and things may come right or may not, but the only way in which we can help is to be quiet and to attend to our own business.”

“*Oh, goeije!* What are you giving those children such a scolding about, father?” chimed in a cheery voice, whose owner came bustling out on to the stoep.

Stephanus De la Rey turned his head, with a smile.

“I am giving them a little good advice,” he said, relighting his pipe. “And I don’t think I’ve ever given them any bad. Have I, boys?”

“No, Pa,” they answered, meaning it, too, but not sorry that their mother had come to the rescue: yet profoundly impressed by the stern earnestness of the paternal expostulation.

“Here come people,” said Stephanus, gliding easily from the subject, which he had no wish to prolong. “Can you make them out, Cornelis?”

“I think so,” replied the youth, shading his eyes, and gazing at two distant but rapidly approaching horsemen. “One is Adrian, and the other – I believe it’s an Englishman from the way he holds his feet in the stirrups. *Ja*– it is. It must be Colvin Kershaw.”

“Is it?”

“Where?”

And the utterers of both queries came forth on to the stoep, causing their brothers to break into a splutter of mirth. The younger of the two girls took after her mother. She was short and dark, and rather too squat for her seventeen years, but had fine eyes. The other, who was a year older, was taller, fair and blue-eyed, and rather pretty.

“Which *is* it, Andrina?” whispered Jan to this one mischievously. “The Englishman, of course! You all go mad over him.”

“Do we? Who’s ‘we,’ and who is ‘all,’ I should like to know?” retorted Andrina, with a toss of her golden head.

“I know I don’t,” said the other girl. “Why, we fight too much for that. But I like fighting him. I wish all Englishmen were like him though. He is so full of fun.”

Stephanus welcomed both arrivals with his usual geniality, not allowing the fact that he disapproved of his nephew politically to make the slightest difference in his manner. The young Boer, however, whose self-confidence was lacking in the presence of one to whom he looked up so much, felt somewhat constrained. However, his message had to be delivered, so he jerked out:

“The Patriot will be here at sundown, Oom Stephanus.”

“So?”

“He addressed us for nearly three hours at Jan Grobbelaar’s two nights ago. *Ja*, it was magnificent to hear him,” went on the speaker, losing himself in his enthusiasm for The Cause. “I wish you would hear him, Oom Stephanus. He would soon convince you.”

“Make a ‘patriot’ of me, you mean, Adrian. I am that already in the real meaning of the word. Well, Colvin, what have you been doing lately? It’s a long time since I’ve seen you.”

“That so, Stephanus? Oh, all sorts of things – farming, and hunting, and taking it easy generally.”

“And making love to that pretty Miss Wenlock,” said Condaas, the younger girl, in a sly undertone.

Colvin turned, with a laugh. He and this household were upon quite intimate terms, and he had been exchanging greetings all-round during the colloquy between uncle and nephew.

“There would be every excuse, wouldn’t there?” he answered, entering into the joke, and, moreover, hugely amused, remembering that almost the last words May had spoken to him had been to chaff him about these very girls, and now almost their first words had been to chaff him about her.

“You ought not to say that in our presence,” said Andrina, with a mimic pout.

“Of course not. But if you had not interrupted me I was going to add – ‘but for the fact of the propinquity of Ratels Hoek and the entrancing but utterly perplexing choice of counter-attractions it affords.’”

“Why will you make those girls talk such a lot of nonsense, Mr Kershaw?” laughed Mrs De la Rey. “They always do whenever you come here. I declare you are making them very dreadful.”

“Didn’t know I exercised such influence over the young and tender mind. It isn’t I who do it, Mrs De la Rey. It’s Adrian there. Depend upon it, he is the delinquent.”

Now Adrian was a good-looking, well-set-up young fellow, who, his fiery “patriotism” notwithstanding, had his clothes built by an English tailor and talked English fluently. Indeed, in the De la Rey household it was spoken almost as frequently as the mother tongue, and the above conversation had been carried on about equally in both languages, gliding imperceptibly from one to the other and back again.

“Adrian? Why, there isn’t a grain of fun left in Adrian these days,” said Condaas, mischievously. “See how solemn he looks. I believe he thinks about nothing but fighting the English.”

“Well, we have just ridden two solid hours together, and he didn’t want to fight me,” said Colvin.

But the young “patriot” was not enjoying this form of chaff, for he turned away, indignantly muttering to the effect that some matters were too high and too great to be made fun of by a pair of giggling girls.

“Now we have made him *kwaatj*,” said Andrina. “See now, I’ll get him to laugh again.” Then, raising her voice, “Adrian! Adrian! wait. I want to stroll round the garden with you and hear about The Cause.”

“That has made him more *kwaat* than ever,” whispered Condaas; for the badgered one, who had hesitated, turned away again with an angry jerk, scenting more chaff on his sacred subject. Andrina looked knowing.

“Adrian!” she hailed again – “Wait. I want to tell you about Aletta. Really. You know, I heard from her yesterday.”

The effect was magical, also comical. The affronted “patriot” stopped short. There was no irresolution now about his change of front.

“Come, then,” he said.

With a comical look at the other two, Andrina tripped off, and that she had satisfactorily carried out her stated intention was manifest by the animated way in which they appeared to be conversing.

“That drew him,” chuckled Condaas. “You know, Mr Kershaw, he was awfully mashed on Aletta the last time she came home.”

“Condaas, what sort of expressions are you using?” said her mother reprovingly. “I don’t know where you learnt them, or what Mr Kershaw will think.”

“Why we learnt them from him, of course, Ma,” replied the girl. “You don’t suppose we picked up that kind of thing from the very solemn old maid you got for us as English governess.”

“Not from me. Maybe it was from Frank Wenlock,” said Colvin, who was speculating how the object of their present merriment could pass by the charms of Andrina, who was undeniably a pretty girl, in favour of her elder sister. The latter he had never seen. She had been absent in Cape Town, at school or with relatives, ever since his own arrival in that part of the country, but there were photographic portraits of her, decking the wall of the sitting-room and the family album. These, to his impartial eye, conveyed the impression of rather a heavy-looking girl, at the awkward stage, with bunched-up shoulders and no pretensions whatever to good looks. To be sure, he had heard a great deal on the subject of the absent one, her attainments and attractiveness, but such he unhesitatingly attributed to family bias.

Struck with a sudden idea, he moved into the sitting-room, and casually, as it were, drew up in front of a framed portrait which stood upon the piano.

“That is the latest of Aletta,” said Condaas, who had followed him in. “She sent it up to us only a post or two ago; since you were here.”

“So?”

He bent down and examined it intently. It represented a girl of about nineteen or twenty. The idea of awkwardness conveyed by the other portraits was no longer there, but in looks he failed to detect any improvement Aletta De la Rey was plain, assuredly plain, he decided.

“*Oh, goeije!* here come a lot of people,” exclaimed Condaas. “The ‘Patriot,’ I suppose.”

A rumbling sound was audible, drawing nearer and nearer. Both made for the window. A cavalcade of Boers was approaching the house, and in the midst, as though escorted by it, moved the white tent of a Cape cart.

Chapter Four.

The Conversion of Stephanus De La Rey

A striking contrast no less than a striking personality was offered by the two leading figures in this group as Stephanus De la Rey advanced to welcome his noted visitor. Both were fine types of their nationality and class – the one calm-faced, reposeful, with the air of a thoroughly contented and prosperous man; the other bright-eyed, restless, alert, with the nervous rapidity of movement of one existing in a state of chronic tension. The greeting between the two was cordial enough, and there was much handshaking, as the others, to the number of a round dozen, dropped in by twos and threes.

“Why, who is this?” exclaimed the delegate, a shade of distrust coming into his face as he shook hands with Colvin Kershaw – for among Boers the ceremony of introduction is but seldom performed. “An Englishman, I believe?”

“That is so, Mynheer Botma. And one who is very proud to make the acquaintance of so famous and gifted a man as yourself,” replied Colvin, who spoke the *taal* very fairly well.

The delegate shot a keen glance at the speaker, then he became quite cordial. He hated the English, but it suddenly occurred to him that this particular Englishman had a look of one who might be turned to some account. Accordingly he engaged him in conversation, during which Colvin adroitly contrived to insinuate that his sympathies were all with the Transvaal cause, and that for the person of Oom Paul in particular he entertained feelings of the profoundest admiration.

“That is good,” said Jan Grobbelaar, showing his tusks approvingly. “We were having much talk about this only last evening, brother,” Turning to the delegate: “Colvin is a neighbour of mine. He is not like other English.”

Whether the object of this comment was gratified thereby or not, he made no sign; but one result of the voucher thus made was that the assembled Boers, to most of whom he was well known, conversed with far less restraint – both then and during the course of the evening. And the burden of their conversation was confined well-nigh entirely to the very strained relations then existing between the Transvaal and the suzerain Power, and what was going to be done upon the final and certain rupture thereof.

Not much was said during the evening meal, and that little was mainly confined to local and farming matters and the prospects or the reverse of a speedy rain. The Boer guests fell to with a will, and did ample justice to the springbuck stew and other delicacies of the veldt as there set forth in abundance; for Mrs De la Rey had anticipated just such an inroad as had taken place. Moreover, she was a model housewife, and possessed of wonderful Dutch recipes of old-time Cape and Batavian origin, and within her domain here were none of the insipid and over-sweetened dishes which prevailed in the ordinary and rougher class of Boer household. After supper – when pipes were in full blast, in such wise, indeed, that it was hardly possible to see across the room – it was not long before the subject engrossing all minds came to the fore.

“So, Colvin. *You* smoke Transvaal tobacco, then?” said one young Boer with a wink at his neighbours, and affecting surprise.

“Rather, Marthinus. Why not?”

“Why, because you’re an Englishman, to be sure.”

“Ha-ha. But then, Marthinus, I happen to be an Englishman who smokes what he likes. And I like Transvaal tobacco. Shall I tell you what else I like? I like *dop*. So just send along that decanter that’s at the other side of Barend Van Zyl’s elbow, will you?”

There was a great laugh at this, and Barend Van Zyl aforesaid made believe to withhold the decanter on the ground that its contents might impair the speaker’s patriotism. It led to a lot of chaff with regard to the political situation, some of which, albeit good-humoured, was keen enough to have

thrown some Englishmen, Frank Wenlock, for instance, into a real fighting rage. This one, however, was made of different stuff. It didn't ruffle him in the least. Moreover, he knew that they were merely "taking the measure of his foot."

"And they say that we can't shoot any more, we young ones," said another Boer. "I saw it in a Cape English newspaper which Piet Lombard had sent him. They say that we are all going off in our shooting, and are good for nothing; that we cannot bring down game like our fathers could."

"*Maagtig!* but they are liars, those English newspaper men," assented somebody else. "*Nee wat.* I would like to get the miserable ink-squirter who wrote that, and make him run at five hundred yards from my Martini. We would soon show him whether we young ones are so *sleg.*"

"Hallo, Marthinus, that's a little too loud," cut in Colvin Kershaw with a laugh. "Why, man, how about that old springbuck ram I saw you miss twice running that shoot we had at Tafelfontein at the end of last season there, *oerkant*, by the vlei? He wasn't a step over four hundred yards. Come now, what would you do with your runaway man at five hundred?"

"That's true," assented Marthinus a little crestfallen. Then brightening up: "But then the English newspaper man would be running too hard. *Ja, kerelen.* Now, an English newspaper man *would* run!"

"Do you know how I was taught to shoot, Colvin?" asked a wiry, middle-aged Boer with a long light beard, pushing his tobacco bag made of dressed buckskin across to the Englishman. "When I was eight years old my father used to put a loaded rifle into my hand. It was a muzzle-loader – we had no Martinis or Mausers in those days. *Maagtig*– no. He didn't give me a second charge for reloading either. He would start me out into the veldt at daybreak, and if I returned without having shot a buck I got no breakfast. Then he would start me off again, and if I returned a second time without having shot a buck I was allowed some dinner, but first of all I got plenty of 'strop.' Then I was turned out again, and if I failed again I got still more 'strop,' and went to bed without any supper. But it was not more than two or three times that happened. *Nee, kerelen!* Well, that is the way to teach a youngster to shoot."

"That's all very well, Izaak," replied Colvin; "but it might be the way to teach some youngsters not to shoot. The fact of knowing they hadn't another chance might get upon their nerves and make them miss."

But the other, whose name was Izaak van Aardt, and who was known amongst his neighbours as second to none for a sure and deadly game shot, only shook his head, unconvinced.

"But," struck in the young Dutchman who had started the chaff about the Transvaal tobacco, "it is only English youngsters who have nerves. Boer youngsters have no nerves." And he winked at the others as at first.

"Haven't they?" responded Colvin Kershaw, with a tranquil smile. "No, especially when you tell them some yarn about the *spoek* that comes out of the waggon-house at night and yells."

They laughed somewhat foolishly at this, the point being that Boer children, filled up as they are with all sorts of Hottentot stories, weird and grotesque, are no more intrepid under the circumstances named than would be other children.

The above conversation, however, was significant of two things. One was the high-pitched tension to which racial feeling had attained among the northern border Dutch. It bristled with sly digs, and open ones too, at the English. They could no more keep such out of their conversation than could Mr Dick keep King Charles's head out of his classic memorial. The second was the exceedingly friendly terms upon which this one Englishman, alone in their midst, stood towards them. Had it been otherwise, while they would have refrained from intentionally saying anything that might have been offensive to their fellow-guest, and one held in so much esteem by the people under whose roof they found themselves, they would have sat taciturn and constrained, confining the conversation for the most part to heavy monosyllables. And as emphasising these two points it is worthy of record.

Now the talkers began to break up, some, however, remaining rooted to their chairs, talking out the situation with increasing vehemence. Others went out to see after their horses, while others

again had convened music in the other room. The Boer, as a rule, is fond of music, even if it takes no more aspiring form than the homely strains of a concertina; and whereas both the De la Rey girls could play, and one could sing, fairly, well, their audience listened with a whole-hearted appreciation not always to be found under like circumstances in the drawing-rooms of the fashionable and of the would-be artistic. Colvin Kershaw likewise was in great request, for he had a smattering of ear knowledge which enabled him to rattle off snatches from most of the comic operas of the day, and these were hugely in favour with his somewhat primitive hearers. He could, too, on occasions, as when performing for the benefit of some old-fashioned and highly orthodox old “Tanta” who deemed all secular music an invention of Satan for the snaring of souls, turn such and similar lively strains, by an alteration of time and expression, into the most solemn and soul-stirring of psalm tunes; to the convulsive, because concealed, delight of Andrina and Condaas and others in the know, and to the ecstatic edification of the antiques aforesaid, who would go away thinking that if only “Mynheer” would induce the performer to play on the harmonium in church on Sunday, what a long way they would travel in order to be present.

But the lighter side of life is never far removed from the momentous, and this was represented in another part of the house, whose owner was closeted in long and earnest conversation with “the Patriot.”

“You are the man we want, Brother De la Rey,” the latter was saying in his quick, emphatic voice, having spent an hour setting forth his mission in all its fulness, and that with the convincing earnestness of a man who thoroughly believes in it. “Just consider. The whole of this district is with us, and not merely the whole of this district but the whole of the Northern border. Others, too, as far as the seaboard on one side and the Cape on the other. You cannot stand aloof. You cannot be the only one to refuse to side with your countrymen, those of your own blood, in their struggle for freedom and power.”

“We had better not talk too much about freedom,” was the reply, with a grave head-shake, “I should like to know, Brother Botma, under what Government we could enjoy greater freedom than that under which we are now living.”

“Under which?” Yes, that is just it. ‘Under which.’ But we ought not to be living ‘under’ any Government but our own. Our independence – that is the star to which our eyes turn. That you yourself dwell happy and in comfort here, Stephanus De la Rey, is but an unworthy way of looking at it. Are the ties of blood-brotherhood nothing? Are the ties of nationality nothing? Is our independence nothing? Selfish considerations must be thrown away now. Why, even you have two sons with us. They will fight in our ranks. Will you, then, fight in those of the enemy?”

“I do not desire any fighting. I deplore this trouble. If the Kafirs were to rise, for instance, I do not think you would find me backward. Ask those who know me if I am not speaking true. But this is a struggle between white men, and in a land, too, where they ought to be brothers.”

“Brothers? We and the English can never be brothers. Listen, Stephanus,” laying an impressive hand upon the other’s arm. “It is a struggle for life and death between us and them. To this end they have been working. To this end have they been throwing all their adventurers into our land. Yes; how many from this country, this very British colony you are so proud to belong to, have come to us without a penny – unable even so much as to make a living under the British flag – have come to us on the very verge of bankruptcy, and actually through it – to make not merely a living, but in many cases large fortunes? And these are the people with a grievance! These are the people who fatten on our land, and then want to seize it because it is richer than theirs. That is why they desire the franchise, that they may oust the burghers who fought for their independence; whose fathers shed their blood like water in withstanding the heathen savage, who went forth determined never again to submit to the English yoke.”

“That is true,” rejoined the other. “Yet it seems to me that it is because of them that the country has become rich. Had they not come there, what then? Who would have worked the gold and the mines?”

“We could have done without the gold and the mines,” was the fiery response. “We did not desire them. We were better as we were. And look, brother. Did these Uitlanders come into our land to benefit our land? If so, why do they not stay there when they have enriched themselves out of it? Do they? Not so. They return to spend the wealth they have made out of us among the Babylon sinks of vice, the large cities of Europe. They came into the land to enrich themselves, certainly not to enrich our land. But now that it is rich they want to seize it.”

The listener made no immediate reply. He sat in troubled meditation, his brow clouded. The speaker, watched him the while with a kind of hungering anxiety. This was the man he desired to win over, a man of weight and standing, whose influence thrown into the scale would bring hundreds to the Afrikaner cause and confirm hundreds more who might be wavering. He went on:

“Everything is ready now. The President will never yield to their demands, and even if he would the burghers will never allow it. If we gave them the five years’ franchise they would then ask for two, then for none at all. And where would we be? Where would we be, I ask you, remembering the shameful attempt upon us three years ago? Mark now, brother. We are about to put forth our strength. We know our strength, they do not. They know not that we are ten times stronger than they think. They boast that by the end of the year the English flag will wave over Pretoria. Will it? We shall see.

“They think that they have only to threaten us and we shall collapse. They have forgotten the lessons of 1881. A God-protected people fighting for its liberties is a terrible thing, Stephanus, and that is what we were then and what we are now. We have for years been collecting arms and ammunition which will render us strong enough for the whole British Army. And then when the whole British Army is hurled against us there are European nations who will hurl themselves upon England. They will not lose their opportunity. They hate England too much for that. Then is our time. Now, Stephanus, will you be the only man who refuses to join his own nationality? I go from here tomorrow, for my mission is at an end, and it has been fruitful beyond my hopes. When I return it will be with our conquering forces to help plant the ‘Vierkleur’ over our new Republic, which shall extend from the Zambesi to the Cape. My dear brother, think. We want you; we want such men as you among our leaders. Throw selfish considerations away, and link yourself with the holy army of patriots.”

The speaker ceased. Carried away by his own fervour, he could hardly any longer bring out his words with sufficient coherence. And that very fervour had carried his listener with him. Stephanus De la Rey was, to tell the truth, deeply impressed. True, he himself had no reason to be otherwise than perfectly contented; but had he any right to consider his own prosperity, his own well-being, when the cause of his countrymen was at stake? Transvaal, Free State, or Cape Colony, were they not all of one blood – all Dutch? Many a man would have considered what advantages might accrue to himself by joining the movement, what risk, even danger, was incurred by abstaining; but this one was honest to the core. The patriotic side was what appealed to him, that and that only. And looking at him as though reading his thoughts, Andries Botma, the Transvaal delegate, was filled with a whole-souled elation. He knew he had won, and that however much time and thought he might give to the situation between this and then, the moment the forces of the allied Republics crossed the border Stephanus De la Rey would be upon their side.

But this Stephanus De la Rey did not know himself, not, at any rate, at that time.

Chapter Five. Signs

“*Jij verdomde Engelschman! Stil maar! Ik saal nit nou jou kop afslaan!*”¹

The speaker is a big Dutchman, the scene the stoep of a roadside hotel in the Karroo, the spoken-to Frank Wenlock. We regret, however, to be obliged to record that our friend has taken on board a glass or two more than he can stow with absolute regard either to equilibrium or strict decorum. A Cape cart and a buggy, the harness hung loosely to the splashboard, stand out-spanned by the broad dusty road, and three or four horses with their saddles on are grouped beneath a stumpy, spreading mimosa, as rooted to the spot by the mere fact of two or three inches of their bridles trailing on the ground as though tied fast to anything solid and tangible.

For reply to the threat, Frank Wenlock utters a defiant laugh, then once more lifts up his voice in song:

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay!
Oom Paul op een vark gerij,
Af hij val en zier gekrij,
Toen klim op en veg gerij.”

With a growl and a curse the big Boer comes at him. He is nearly a head the taller and far the heavier and more powerful man; but Frank Wenlock knows how to use his hands a bit, and, “sprung” as he is, he parries the sledge-hammer blow aimed at him by his large assailant, and stands ready. The latter begins to parley:

“What do you insult our President for, then?” he growls.

“Can’t I sing a song if I want?” returns Frank. “Besides, Oom Paul isn’t your President.”

“Ah, but he soon will be. And won’t he make the *rooineks* run?”

“Well, here’s a *rooinek* you can’t make run, Hermanus Delport, elephant as you are. Come along and have a try, will you? What? You won’t? You’re a bally coward then – and you’re twice my size.

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay,
Oom Paul op een vark gerij – ”

he begins again in a tone that is insulting and defiant to the last degree.

There are other Dutchmen on the stoep. These, who have laughed hitherto, expecting to see their huge compatriot simply double up the smaller but foolhardy Englishman, now spring to their feet with incensed shouts.

“Go at him, Hermanus. Knock him down and lay your *sjambok* about him. Cut him into *riempjes*. We’ll give him Oom Paul!” are some of the cries wherewith they nerve their champion on to war.

There is no backing out of it now. Delport hurls himself upon Frank, who stands there, squaring up, and still singing the nonsensical – and to Boer susceptibilities offensive – quatrain. But a very hard right- and lefthander meets him, and that in each eye, causing him to stagger back. Frank, however, has not come off unscathed, for the big Boer’s fist has more than grazed his cheekbone. The others crowd up behind their champion, renewing their shouts of encouragement.

¹ “You d – d Englishman! Be quiet. I’ll knock your head off just now.”

“Come on, come on! I’ll take the bally lot of you, when I’ve polished off that elephant there,” shouts Frank in English, waltzing towards the group, his hands up and ready.

“No, you jolly well won’t, Frank,” cuts in another English voice, whose owner tranquilly steps in between the combatants. “Come now, stop making a fool of yourself, of all yourselves.”

“I shan’t. Get out of this, Colvin, and – mind your own business,” retorted Frank, speaking none too articulately. “Old elephant Hermanus said he could make rooineks run. I want him to make this *rooinek* run – if he can.”

“He insulted the President,” shouted the Boers. “*Ja*, he sang an insulting song.”

“Now, Frank, you know you did, for I heard you while I was getting ready to inspan,” said Colvin Kershaw in his most persuasive tones. “And look here, old chap, fair-play you know is fair-play. If one of them had sung such stuff as that about the Queen – rotten, contemptible stuff as it is – how long would it be before you sailed into him?”

“Not one bally second,” replied Frank briskly.

“Well, then – you’ve trodden on these chaps’ corns pretty hard, and you might as well tell them you were only larking.”

The speaker was on tenterhooks, for he knew by experience what a difficult customer Frank Wenlock was to manage on the few occasions when he had had a drop too much. The chances that he would become obstreperous and provoke a general row or not were about even. But either the moral influence of his mentor was paramount, or some glimmer of the logical faculty had worked its way into Frank’s thoughtless but good-natured mind, and he was amenable.

“*Toen, kerelen*, I didn’t mean anything,” he called out in Dutch; “I was only larking. Let’s have another drink all-round.”

“No, you don’t, Frank,” said Colvin quickly and in an undertone. “You’ve quite enough of that cargo on board already.”

By this time the horses were inspanned, and the two went among the group of Boers to bid farewell. Some put out a paw with more than half a scowl on their faces, others turned into the house to avoid the necessity of shaking hands with Englishmen at all. Among these was Hermanus Delport.

“*Ja*, wait a bit!” he growled, half aloud. “Wait a bit, friend Wenlock! If I don’t put a bullet through you before this year is dead, I’ll – I’ll become an Englishman.”

And he rubbed some raw spirit on his now fast-swelling bruises, a dark and vengeful scowl upon his heavy face. The seed scattered by Andries Botma had been well sown.

Chucking a sixpence to the ragged, yellow-skinned Hottentot, who sprang away from the horses’ heads, Colvin whipped up, sending the buggy spinning over the flat Karroo road, the dust flying up obliquely from the hoofs and wheels in a long, fan-like cloud. They were returning from Schalkburg, the district town, and had a good two hours of smart driving to reach Spring Holt, the Wenlocks’ farm, before dark – for they had made a late start from the township. For the first hour Frank was a bit drowsy, then, when he had pulled himself together a bit, his guide, philosopher, and friend judged it time to deliver something of a lecture.

“Frank, you know this won’t do. I thought you had more self-control. The last two times we have been into Schalkburg together you’ve come out boozy.”

“Oh, hang it, old chap, it was so beastly hot! If we had started before breakfast instead of at twelve, it would have been all right. But Schalkburg is such a dry hole, and you get such a thirst on!”

“I don’t. But you will get liquoring up with every man Jack who speaks to you.”

“Well, but – you can’t refuse. And then you only go in there once in a blue moon. Surely one can have a bit of a spree.”

“No, you needn’t – not that sort of spree. And you can refuse. I often do. No – no – old chap, you can’t afford to make a Hottentot of yourself, and remember, you’ve got womenkind to look after.”

“Er – I say, Colvin, you know. Don’t let go anything to them about this, will you?”

“Of course not. Don’t you know me better than that? But squarely, Frank, unless you undertake to get on another tack I’ll never go into Schalkburg with you again.”

“Anyone would think I was a regular boozier,” said Frank, sulkily.

“That’s just what I don’t want you to become. And look here, you jolly near got up the devil’s own row at Reichardt’s. Those Dutchmen will spread all over the country that we were both roaring tight. Besides, what if that row had come off – we should come home nice objects with our noses broken and our teeth kicked down our throats? For remember they were a round dozen, and we only two, and some of these very ones, I happen to know, are pretty tough customers. Here, Frank. Take the reins, so long. There are a couple of fine *pauw*. Think we can get any nearer?”

“No. Let go at them from the cart.”

They had just topped a light swell, and there, about two hundred and odd yards from the road, stalked the great bustards. Quickly Colvin slipped from the buggy, and keeping on its other side, rifle in hand, watched his chance. Taking a careful and steady aim, he fired. Both birds rose, and winged their flight, but, after a few yards, the hindermost half dropped, then, flopping along a little further, came heavily to the earth, where it lay with wings outspread and quite dead.

“That’s good!” observed Colvin; “I knew he’d got it, heard the bullet ‘klop’.”

They picked up the splendid bird and regained the road. But before they had gone half a mile they made out a horseman riding furiously after them as though in pursuit.

“It’s old Sarel Van der Vyver,” said Frank, looking back. “Let’s give him a gallop, eh? He looks in a devil of a rage.”

“No – no! We must smooth him down,” answered Colvin, drawing the pace in to a slow trot. Very soon their pursuer galloped up, and they made out an old Boer in a weather-beaten white chimney-pot hat, and wearing a bushy grey beard. He seemed, as Frank had said, “in a devil of a rage,” and brandished in his hand a long-barrelled Martini.

“*Daag*, Oom Sarel!” called out the two in the buggy.

But the old man met this amenity with a torrent of abuse. What did they mean by coming into his veldt and shooting his game without his leave, and scaring his ostriches all over the place? He did not keep game to be shot by *verdomde rooineks*, not he. And much more to the same effect.

Both were rather surprised. They had never been on other than the friendliest of terms with this old man, and now he was rating them as though he had never seen them before in their lives. Well, here was another very significant sign of the times. But it gave Colvin an idea.

“Take the bird, Oom Sarel,” he said, making as though he would pull it out from the back of the buggy. “I only shot it for the fun of the thing – and besides, it was possible that Andries Botma might be at Spring Holt when we got back, and a fine *pauw* might come in handy for the supper of the Patriot.”

The effect of the name was magical.

“*Kyk!* Do you know Mynheer Botma, then?” asked the old Boer, in round-eyed astonishment.

“We had a great talk together at Stephanus De la Rey’s the other night, Oom Sarel,” responded Colvin; “but come along with us, and see if he has arrived at Wenlock’s to-night.”

This invitation the old man declined, though somewhat reluctantly. “He could not leave home,” he said. “But the bird – of course they must keep it. A friend of the Patriot! Well, well, Colvin must not mind what had been said at first. He,” the speaker, “had been a little put out that day, and was growing old.” Then exchanging fills out of each other’s pouch, they literally smoked the pipe of peace together, and parted amid much cordial handshaking.

“There’s a sign of the times for you, Frank,” said Colvin as they resumed their way. “Andries Botma’s name is one to conjure with these days. But note how his influence crops up all along the line! Even old Sarel Van der Vyver was prepared to make himself disagreeable. Not a Dutchman round here will hesitate to join the Transvaal, if things go at all wrong with us.”

“I’d cut short his influence with a bullet or a rope if I were Milner,” growled Frank.

Soon, in the distance, the homestead came in sight Colvin dropped into silence, letting his thoughts wander forth to the welcome that awaited him, and the central figure of that welcome spelt May Wenlock. He was not in love with her, yet she appealed to more than one side of his nature. She was very pretty, and very companionable; and girls of whom that could be said were very few and far between in the Wildschutsberg surroundings. Several of the Boer girls were the first, but few of them had any ideas, being mostly of the fluffy-brained, giggling type. May was attractive to him, undeniably so, but if he tried to analyse it he decided that it was because they had been thrown so much together; and if he had evoked any partiality in her, he supposed it was for the same reason – there was no one else.

“Who’s that likely to be, Frank?” he said, as they drew near enough to make out a male figure on the stoep.

“Eh? Who? Where?” returned Frank, starting up, for he was drowsy. “*Maagtig*, it looks like Upton, the scab-inspector. *Ja*. It is.”

No – there was nothing lacking in the welcome that shone in May’s eyes, thought Colvin, as they exchanged a hand-pressure. And he was conscious of a very decided feeling of gratification; indeed he would not have been human were it otherwise.

“Well, Upton, what’s the news?” said Frank, as they were outspanning, and unpacking the contents of the buggy. “Is it going to be war?”

“Don’t know. Looks like it. The troops in Grahamstown and King are getting ready for all they know how. Man, but things are looking nasty. The Dutchmen up in the Rooi-Ruggensberg are as bumptious as they can be. Two of them wouldn’t let me look at their flocks at all. I shall have to summon them, I suppose.”

The duties of the speaker being to overhaul periodically the flocks of all the farmers, Dutch and British, within a large area, in search of the contagious and pestilential scab, it followed that he was in the way of gauging the state of feeling then prevalent. Personally, he was a very popular man, wherefore the fact of his having met with active opposition was the more significant as to the state of the country.

“They’re just the same here,” said Frank. “For my part, the sooner we have a war the better. I wish our farm was somewhere else, though. We are too much in among the Dutch here for things to be pleasant for the mother and May when the fun does begin.”

Now Master Frank, though carefully omitting to specify what had led up to the incident of the road wherewith this chapter opens, expatiated a great deal upon the incident itself in the course of the evening, thereby drawing from his mother much reproof, uttered, however, in a tone that was more than half an admiring one. But in that of May was no note of admiration. It was all reproving.

“You are much too quarrelsome, Frank,” she said; “I don’t see anything particularly plucky in always wanting to fight people. It’s a good thing you had someone to look after you.” And the swift glance which accompanied this should have been eminently gratifying to the “someone” who had looked after him.

“Oh, if you’re all down upon a chap, I shall scoot. I’m going round to give the horses a feed. Coming, Upton?”

“*Ja*,” replied that worthy; and they went out. So did Mrs Wenlock, having something or other to see to in the kitchen.

There was silence between the two thus left. Colvin, sitting back in a cane chair, was contemplating the picture before him in the most complacent state of satisfaction. How pretty the girl looked bending over the ornamental work she was engaged in, the lamplight upon her wavy golden hair, the glow of freshness and health in her cheeks, the thick lashes half veiling the velvety-blue eyes!

“Well?” she said softly, looking up. “Talk to me.”

“Haven’t got anything to say. I’m tired. I prefer to look at you instead.”

“You are a dear to say so,” she answered. “But all the same I want livening up. I am getting a dreadful fossil – we all are – stuck away here, and never seeing a soul. I believe I shall get mother to let me go away for quite a long time. I am horribly tired of it all.”

“And of me?”

“You know I am not.”

The blue eyes were very soft as they met his. A wave of feeling swept over the man. Looking at her in her winning, inviting beauty as she sat there, an overwhelming impulse came upon him to claim her – to take her for his own. Why should he not? He knew that it lay entirely with him. He made a movement to rise. In another moment she would be in his arms, and he would be pouring words of passion and tenderness into her ear. The door opened.

“Haven’t those two come in yet?” said Mrs Wenlock briskly, as she re-entered, and quietly resumed her seat, thus unconsciously affecting a momentous crisis in two lives. Was it for good or for ill? We shall see.

Note.

“Oom Paul is riding on a pig —
He falls off and hurts himself,
Then climbs up and rides away – ”

A nonsensical bit of popular doggerel. In Dutch it makes a jingling rhyme.

Chapter Six. Colvin makes a Discovery

“Gert.”

“Baas?”

“Saddle up Aasvogel after breakfast. I am going over to Krantz Kop.”

Thus Colvin Kershaw to his henchman, Gert Bondelzwart. The latter was a bastard Griqua – an elderly man, of good height and powerful build. He had taken part in the Langeberg rising, but had been “slim” enough to slip away just in time, and had contrived to put a large section of country between himself and the scene of his former misdeeds. At this man Colvin’s neighbours looked askew. He had “schelm” writ large all over his yellow personality, they declared. Colvin himself thought them likely to be right; but then Gert suited him. He was a good servant, and had never given him any trouble. Moreover, he had an idea that the fellow had, for some unaccountable reason, conceived an attachment for himself. Anyway, he did not choose to part with him to please anybody.

“Did you hear what I said, Gert?”

“Ja, sir.”

“Then why the devil don’t you answer, and go and do what I tell you, instead of standing there shaking your silly head as if a bee had stung you in the ear?”

“Krantz Kop is up at the far end of the *berg*, sir. Boer *menschen* up there very *kwaai*.”

“Well? What’s that to you? I didn’t say I wanted an after-rider.”

“Gideon Roux very *schelm* Boer, sir. Strange things happen at Krantz Kop.”

“Oh, go away, Gert. Get in Aasvogel from the camp – no, he’s still in the stable. Well, give him another bundle, so long.”

“What am I to ride, sir?”

“You to ride? Confound you, I said I didn’t want an after-rider.”

“I would like to go with Baas.”

Something about the persistency of the man struck Colvin. This yellow-skinned henchman of his was a wonderful fellow, and there was precious little he didn’t know. Well, he would take him.

“You can go then, Gert. You’ll have to ride Pansy, and she’s in a camp full of *kwaai* birds. Cobus and the others can help get her out – but hurry up, for I don’t want to be kept waiting.”

Colvin turned into his house and sat down to his solitary breakfast, waited upon by Gert’s wife, a middle-aged well-looking woman, as neat in her attire and person as the table arrangements were scrupulously clean and well served; a very jewel of a housekeeper, he was wont to declare, for a miserable bachelor establishment in the Karroo. The house itself was of no great pretensions – being merely a type of a not very well-to-do farmer’s residence – it having just passed out of the possession of that class of Boer. But there was plenty of room in it, and it could easily be improved, if its present owner made up his mind to remain on in it. And, indeed, it was a matter not very far from foreign to the question of improving and remaining on in it that was occupying the said owner’s mind as he sat alone at breakfast that morning.

How would May Wenlock look in her bright, sweet freshness, making a second at that solitary table? Her personality seemed to be creeping more and more into his life. Why did he not ask her to share it, the more so that he had no doubt as to what the answer would be? He was not a conceited man, but he was a fairly experienced and clear-sighted one, and would have been a born fool had he failed to perceive that the girl was more than partial to him.

Propinquity – that is, opportunity – has much to answer for. They had been thrown together a great deal, for have we not said that he had spent some time with the Wenlocks while looking about for a farm of his own? Moreover, he had come there handicapped by a kind of spurious heroic

glamour, in that he was supposed to have saved Frank's life on one occasion in the Matopo Hills, what time they were hotly pressed by the Matabele, and that rash youth had chosen to hang back when he should have been retiring with the column. He had collected half a dozen volunteers and brought him out just in time. To his own mind it had been all in the day's work, but others had seen fit to make a great deal more of it than it seemed to deserve. Of course the girl had begun by making a sort of hero of him. Again, he himself personally was the kind of man that women take to – cultured, travelled, well-bred, and full of *savoir vivre*. It would have been strange if, considering the life the girl led, the few men she saw, of her own nationality at least – for although several of the young Dutch men around were both well-looking and well educated, she could not take to them – she should come to think a great deal of her brother's friend, and their only English neighbour. Hence the intimacy that had grown and ripened between them.

Now he sat there thinking everything out. How near he had been only the evening before last to asking her to share his life! A fraction of a moment more would have done it, but for the interruption – timely or otherwise. Which was it? He loved her – how indeed could he help doing so, when in addition to all her attractions she was always so sweet and lovable to him? But he was not *in love* with her. He had passed the age for “falling in love;” had reached that wherein men become wholesomely critical. May Wenlock *as* May Wenlock was one personality – and a very charming and alluring personality at that May Wenlock with a proprietary interest, and a legally signed and sealed vested right in himself, was another. He had not been slow to descry in her a very strong spice of natural temper and wilfulness; and although now her demeanour towards himself was invariably sweet and winning, would it always be so? And this was a side of the picture which did not allure.

Propinquity! He had seen repeated instances, of the results of this, had even experienced some. The girl or, woman who “could not live without you” to-day might be voting you a bore of the first water by this time next year, or even earlier. Personally he had never felt disposed to find fault with this development. It cut both ways, as often as not in point of fact, his experience told him. But on one occasion, long years ago, it had not. He had been hard hit, and the process had left a bruise, a scar, not readily obliterated. Now, however, applying the recollection of that case to this, he decided that the symptoms were wanting. He was not in love with May, much as her presence appealed to him, and yet the consciousness of what he knew his presence meant to her afforded him a gratification he would not have been human had he not experienced.

Preferentially, too, he was not inclined to embark in matrimony. He had seen too much of it – too many instances of the weary humdrum chain thus riveted, the welding together of two lives into a deteriorating round of petty frictions which it furnished. But in this instance there was a still greater and, to his mind, more fatal bar. With all the advantages, the free and easy social code, and republican waiving of social distinctions which colonial life afforded, the fact remained that the Wenlocks were some little way from being his social equals. And he was a great believer in birth and breeding. In which connection he could not but admit to himself that the mere fact of the interruption by Mrs Wenlock of their *tête-à-tête* the other evening had jarred less upon him than a something in her tone and speech when effecting it. More uneasily still, he was constrained to admit that he had on certain rare occasions detected manifestations of lack of breeding in May herself, such indeed as he had never traced a sign of, at any time or under any circumstances, in the De la Rey girls for instance, or in any member of that family. And yet Stephanus de la Rey was “only a Boer.”

At this juncture the sound of horse hoofs outside cut short his meditations. The morning air was fresh and keen, and Aasvogel, a tall, deep-shouldered iron-grey, having been stabled for some days, gave him plenty to take care of when first mounted. But Colvin was fond of riding, so presently, letting out the powerful animal for all he wanted over the wide Karroo plains, a sense of keen joyous exhilaration scattered all serious thought to the four winds of heaven.

Soon the plain was left behind, giving way to a steep, rugged mountain-road winding between the spurs. Higher and higher it led, overhung by craggy cliffs, resonant with the shrill scream of the *dasje* and the loud hoarse bark of the sentinel baboon.

“Look there, Baas,” said Gert Bondelzwart, pointing to a cleft which ran up into a krantz where the slope ended not very high overhead. “That is where Gideon Roux shot a Kafir. He is a *schelm* Boer is Gideon Roux.”

“Was it during the war?”

“*Nee, nee*, sir. The Kafir had come to take away a girl Gideon Roux had on his place. Gideon did not want her to go, but the Kafir insisted – said he had been sent by her people to fetch her. So Gideon had him tied to the waggon-wheel and thrashed him with an *agter os sjambok*, till he should promise not to ask for the girl any more. He would not; so Gideon left him tied up all night, promising him some more sjambok in the morning. But by then the Kafir had managed to get loose. He hadn’t much start, though, and they hunted him with dogs. He tried to hide in that hole there, but Gideon and Hermanus Delpont they called to him to come out. He wouldn’t. He had climbed on a rock inside to escape the dogs and was afraid to move. So they shot him dead.”

“When was this, Gert, and what did they do with the body?”

“About three years ago, Baas, or it might have been four. Do with the body? *Maagtig*, sir! There are holes and pits in these mountains where you or I might conveniently disappear and never be heard of again.”

“Are you cooking up a yam, Gert, just to pass the time; for don’t you know that in this country you can’t shoot even a Kafir and stow him comfortably away without being tried for murder and hanged?”

The man shook his head, with a very humorous look upon his yellow face. It bordered almost upon amused contempt.

“It can be done, sir, and it was done. All the country knows it. Gideon Roux and Hermanus Delpont only laugh. Not a man in the Wildschutsberg or the Rooi-Ruggensberg would dare accuse them, or dare come forward to give evidence. *Nee*, sir, not a man, white, brown, or black. There are very *schelm* Boers in these mountains, and whoever tried to stir up that affair his life would not be worth a tickey. They would shoot him as they did the Kafir.”

Colvin reined in his horse to the slowest of foot-paces, and stared at the cleft as though struck with an idea.

“Have you ever been into that hole, Gert?”

“*Nee*, sir.”

“Then how do you know there is a rock in there the Kafir could jump on to escape Gideon Roux’s dogs?”

“That is the story, Baas.”

“Well, I’m going to have a look inside there. You remain here with the horses, and if anyone passes you can say I have gone after a reebok under the krantz.”

The ascent, though steep, was not long, and soon Colvin was standing within the mouth of the hole. It was a jagged fissure – running about twenty feet into the cliff, then narrowing to a low tunnel of about ten more.

Yes, this was quite correct. There was a rock – or rather a boulder. Colvin pictured, by the light of a flaming vesta, the hunted man standing gingerly on the apex of this to avoid the excited springs and snaps of the dogs. There was no sign, however, of any human remains – but – wait. Hallo! what was this?

The tunnel, which narrowed in from the end of the fissure, was half blocked. Colvin lighted another vesta, and bent down. Through the piled-up dust he made out what looked like a square rectangular stone. Stone? No – it was wood. It was one of three long flat packing-cases, piled one on

top of the other. His nerves tingled with excitement. What discovery was he on the point of making? At any rate, whatever it might be, he would make it.

Now that his vision was accustomed to the semi-gloom he had no need of artificial light. The glimmering that entered from the outer day was sufficient. He hauled out the uppermost case. But how to open it? That might be done. Fortunately, he was provided with a large pocket-knife, containing various appliances which included a strong screwdriver. What was he going to discover? Human remains? Perhaps. Why, there might be others stowed away in like manner; victims of the wild and lawless inhabitants of this remote mountain district.

Then it occurred to him that the chest was very heavy. What on earth could it contain, and, by the way, what right had he to pry into its contents? For a moment he paused. But the curiosity and excitement attending upon this discovery were too great. Possibly, even, these chests and their contents had lain there for years and years unknown to anybody – even to the owner of the wild, and stony, and scattered stock-run on which they were hidden, but remembering Gert's story that did not seem likely. Anyway, he would share the mystery with whoever held it. That could do no harm to anybody.

The lid was strongly screwed down. A few minutes of vigorous perspiring work and it was up. Whatever the contents were, they were protected by a thick wrapper of oilskin. This he proceeded to unwind, but carefully, so as to be able to replace it readily. Then a quantity of tow, also well oiled, and then —

No human remains, no shining coins, no old and massive silver, no treasure of any kind met his eager gaze. But there, in the top of the box, lay several rifles in a row.

He took one out, carried it as near the light of day as he dared go, and examined it. The weapon was one of the newest pattern – a Mauser. The others on the top layers were all alike. Allowing for the depth of the chest, he reckoned that it must contain at least a couple of dozen rifles. Here was a discovery. What was the meaning of this secret armoury? There could be only one. For only one purpose could these weapons be stowed away thus in the caves of the rocks – for the arming of the rebel Boers when the word went forth for them to rise, and join their brethren in the Transvaal and Free State, to throw off the British yoke from the Zambesi to Cape Agulhas.

Replacing the rifle, he rapidly screwed down the case, and stowed it away in the hole whence he had taken it, carefully piling up the dust and loose earth against it and the others so as to obviate all trace of interference. Hardly had he done so than the sound of hoof-strokes and harsh voices without struck upon his ear. Peering cautiously forth, he beheld, down upon the track from which he had ascended, two armed and mounted Boers, and they were in close confabulation with Gert Bondelzwart, his retainer.

Chapter Seven. An Evil Ambush

Standing there within the cave, which had now become his hiding-place, Colvin Kershaw was conscious of very mingled feelings. His hiding-place! Why should he be in hiding? why should he not go forth? Only that to do so would place his life in very serious jeopardy – not at the moment perhaps, for they would hardly venture to murder him openly and in broad daylight; besides, he had his revolver on. No, it would be afterwards, when they could waylay him at some unexpected part of the track – and what was the use of a revolver against the rifles of two or more cleverly ambushed foes? They could shoot him down without the slightest risk to themselves, and shoot him down he knew they would, and that without a moment's hesitation, once they became aware that he had discovered their perilous because treasonable secret. He would never get out of the mountains alive.

Nor was it reassuring when he satisfied himself as to the identity of the new arrivals, for they were none other than Gideon Roux himself and Hermanus Delpont, the big Dutchman who had fallen foul of Frank Wenlock at the roadside inn. Both bore characters of evil repute.

Would they never go on? They were talking voluminously, but were too far off for the burden of their words to travel. The big man was holding his rifle aloft as though threatening Gert with the butt thereof; but the Griqua stood his ground, calm and unintimidated. Would they never go on? Colvin felt his position growing more and more ignominious. Then again, what if they should conclude to come up and investigate? But they did not. To his intense relief they put their horses into the track again and cantered off in the direction whither he himself was bound.

“Very *schelm* Boer, Gideon Roux, sir,” said Gert, in reply to his master's questioning. “They asked where my Baas was, and I told them gone after a reebok. They laughed over an Englishman shooting reebok with a revolver, when he could not even shoot anything with a rifle. Then, Baas, Hermanus he said I was a lying Hottentot, and threatened to knock my brains out with the butt of his gun. He said Hottentots and Englishmen were equally liars.”

“Well, it's of no consequence. But I'm afraid the chances of getting my money out of Gideon Roux to-day are very poor.”

“Does Baas want to get money out of Gideon Roux, then?”

“Of course *I* do, you ass. He hasn't paid for those sheep yet.”

“One hundred and twenty-five pounds, Baas. If I had ten pounds I would not offer it for the chance of that hundred and twenty-five pounds,” and Gert shook his head, puckering his face into the most whimsical expression.

“Well, Gert, I believe you're right. However, I may get some of it. But I don't think we shall see Gideon. Now that he knows I'm coming up he won't be at home.”

The contrast between Ratels Hoek and Gideon Roux' farm was about in proportion to that between their respective owners. A long, low building, with dirty whitewashed walls and thatched roof, standing against a bleak and desolate hill-slope – the front door opening in two parts – dilapidated stone kraals, situated on the slope aforesaid, so that in time of the rains all the drainage thence rushed round the back wall of the house – some draggled-tailed poultry, and two or three fever-stricken sheep – this is what Colvin saw as he rode up to his destination. The while, the air was thick with an awful combination of adjacent dead goat and a partly decomposed oxhide, in process of preparation for the making of reims.

Even as he had expected, Gideon Roux was not at home. His wife, a large, fat, and albeit quite young, already shapeless person, untidy and slatternly of attire, came forward and tendered a moist paw, with the simple salutation “*Daag!*” or “good-day” – an example followed by her sister, who was a replica of herself though a trifle more shapely and less slovenly but not less awkward. Several brats,

in varying stages of dirt, hung around, finger in mouth, gaping at the new arrival. There were some strange Boers there too, with whom Colvin exchanged greetings; but their manner was awkward and constrained. It was a relief to him when his hostess declared that dinner was ready.

It was an appalling meal to the civilised palate and digestion that to which they now sat down. There was a stew, fearfully and wonderfully made, of leathery goat, sweetened to a nauseating point with quince jam, and, for vegetable, boiled pumpkin, containing almost as much water as pumpkin. The cloth was excessively grimy, and, worse still, bore many an ancient stain which showed that the day of its last washing must have been lost in the mists of antiquity, and there was no salt. The coffee, moreover, tasted like a decoction of split peas, and was plentifully interwoven with hair, and straw as from the thatch. The women did not sit down to table with them, but handed in the dishes from the kitchen, and then sat and waited until the men had done.

Through all her natural stolidity it struck Colvin that both the countenance and manner of his hostess wore a flurried, not to say scared, look. She seemed to try and avoid conversation with him; and it squared with the fact of Gideon Roux being from home. Could any information be got out of her? To this end he began to question her in an artless conversational way.

“Gideon will be in directly, Juffrouw?”

“*Nee*, Mynheer Kershaw. He will not be in. He left home yesterday morning and I do not expect him back until to-morrow night.”

“*So?* That is strange. Why, I thought I saw him just now, the other side of the *poort*— just half an hour’s ride from here. He was coming in this direction too.”

“*Nee, nee*— that cannot be.” And the look of alarm upon the woman’s face seemed to deepen.

“Strange that. Why, I even recognised the man who was riding with him. It looked like Hermanus Delpport.”

There was no mistaking the effect this time. She looked downright hideously scared. It could not be, she reiterated. He must have been mistaken. And then to cover her confusion she turned away to a cupboard, and, unlocking it, brought out a decanter of Boer brandy, which she placed upon the table.

“*Maagtig, kerel!*” cried one of the Dutchmen, seizing the bottle gleefully, and pouring out a copious *soepje*. “It is true you must have been seeing *spoeks*. The *poort* is said to be haunted, you know.”

Colvin fell into the humour of the thing seemingly, and replied in like bantering vein. But he was thinking the while, and thinking hard. The fear evinced by Gideon Roux’ wife would not be manifested by a stolid practical Boer woman under the mere circumstances of a neighbour having come to press her husband for the payment of a by no means ruinous debt. It was something deeper than that. It was more like the demeanour of a naturally respectable and law-abiding person who was made the involuntary sharer of some grim and terrible secret, which she dared neither to divulge nor even hint at. It set him thinking, and the burden of his thoughts was that his return home should be effected as much as possible by daylight, and as far as possible by a different route.

Now, Gideon Roux was no fool of a Boer, neither was his confederate Hermanus Delpport, consequently, having disappeared over the neck in the direction of the former’s home, they proceeded to execute a backward manoeuvre. Leaving their horses standing about twenty yards the other side, and well out of sight, they stealthily retraced their steps until they could gain a point which commanded a view of Gert Bondelzwart and the two horses under his charge. Not long had they been there before they saw all they wanted to see. They saw Colvin emerge from the cave under the *krantz*, and descend to where he had left his servant. But they did not wait until he had rejoined the latter. Mounting their horses, they sent those astonished animals along at a break-neck gallop, which brought them to the homestead fully twenty minutes earlier than the expected visitor. It took them less than five to execute their next move, which was to exchange their long Martinis for a Mauser rifle apiece — a weapon which had not then, openly at any rate, reached the Wildschutsberg section of country, and which they fished out from some hidden recess. Cartridges and a bottle of ‘dop’ they

placed in a haversack, and with a significant injunction to their fellow-countrymen there gathered, to keep the Englishman talking and making merry as late as possible, they rode off into the veldt again, taking a line which would put them out of sight of the house in about three minutes.

“He knows too much, that damned Englishman,” snarled Gideon Roux, shading a match to light his pipe, while his steed took him along at a fast “triple.” He was a sinister-looking, swarthy-faced Boer, with a short black beard and a great hooked nose like the beak of a bird of prey. “We must teach him – him and his Hottentot – not to come pushing his snout into other people’s affairs.”

“That is so,” assented the other. “But, Gideon, what if there is a noise made about it, and they are found afterwards? The English will hang us. And he is a friend of Oom Stephanus.”

“*Maagtig!* By the time they are found the English will not be here to hang anybody, and we, *ou’maat* (old chum) – we shall have deserved the thanks of all true patriots for having put out of the way an enemy of our country. Oom Stephanus – well, he is a patriot now, his own nephew, Adrian De la Rey, told me so. What is one cursed Englishman more than another to a good patriot. He cannot be a friend to such.”

“That is so,” replied the big Boer laconically.

For about an hour they kept on their way, and their way was a rough one, for they avoided the regular track, winding in and out among the mountains, now putting their horses up a steep boulder-strewn slope, then being obliged to dismount in order to lead the animals down a kind of natural rock staircase. Finally, they drew rein upon a neck, where, lying between two great boulders, themselves utterly invisible from below, they could command the broken, winding, rocky track for some little distance, either way.

“He cannot be here yet,” said Gideon Roux as he scanned the road, which, like a snake, wound along the valley beneath. “Hans Vermaak will see to that. Only, I hope Katrina will not let them have too much to drink. Hans is quite fool enough to get drunk and jolly, and insist on the Englishman stopping the night Hans is the devil to drink, and then he becomes jolly. That is where he is such a fool.”

They hid the horses well down over the other side of the ridge, lest the approach of the other animals should cause them to neigh, then returned to their positions under the rocks. The road was about three hundred yards beneath, and on the other side of it was the river bed, now dry. This circumstance, too, came into the strategy of the murderous pair.

“See now, Mani,” (Hermanus abbreviated), said Gideon Roux. “If we shoot as we always shoot, both will drop into the river bed. And to-night,” looking upward at a black cloud which was thickly and gradually spreading, “the river will come down. I will take the Englishman, and you take the Hottentot.”

“*Ja*, but I am not so sure with these damned Mausers,” growled Hermanus Delport, looking up and down his weapon. “I might miss – then where would we be? We had better have kept to our old Martinis. We understand them.”

“*Nee, nee*. It comes to the same thing, I tell you, and if you miss you can go on shooting until you *raak*. I know *I* shan’t miss. *Maagtig, kerel!* What are you doing? Put away that pipe!”

But Hermanus protested he was not going to do without his smoke for all the adjectival English in Africa or in England either, and it took at least ten minutes of his confederate’s time and talk to persuade him that not only the spark but the smoke of a pipe was visible for any distance in the clear, yet half-gloomy atmosphere then prevailing. For the leaden lour of the heavens pointed to the coming of a storm.

In effect the surroundings were very much in harmony with the dark deed of blood which these two miscreants were here to perpetrate. The wild and rugged recesses of the Wildschutsbergen, sparsely inhabited and but seldom travelled, spread around in grim, forbidding desolation. Great krantzes towered skyward, rearing up from the apex of smooth boulder-strewn grass slopes, and here and there a lofty coffee-canister shaped cone, turret-headed, and belted round with the same smooth

cliff-face, stood like a giant sentinel. Below, the valleys, deep and rugged, seamed with dongas, and that through which the track lay, skirting the now dry bed of the Sneeuw River. No sign of life was upon this abode of desolation; no grazing flock, or stray *klompje* of horses, not even a bird, springing chirruping from the grass; and away yonder the further crags stood against a background of inky cloud, which, gradually working nearer, amid low mutterings of thunder, was bringing the storm which should act as accomplice in hiding the slain victims of the two ambushed murderers.

“That is right,” chuckled Gideon Roux, rubbing his hands. “The river will come down to-night like the devil. By this time to-morrow the Englishman and his Hottentot will be nearly at the sea. It is hundreds of miles off, but a flooded river travels as quick as a train.”

“What if they are stranded half-way?” said the other, with an evil sneer.

“Then the jackals will eat them. Either way it matters nothing.”

Darker and darker it grew. The storm cloud began to throw out loose masses of flying scud, through which the moon now and again shone out in fitful gleam. Still, to these two their prey came not in sight.

“I like not this,” growled Hermanus. “This is no light to shoot by. We may miss one or both, and to miss one is as bad as to miss both. Besides, the river may not take them down after all. We two may be hanged for to-night’s work, Gideon.”

“Hanged? Oh, yes! See now, Mani, why I would have it done with Mausers. Their bullet makes a small hole, our Martini bullet makes a large hole. And there is not a Mauser or a Lee-Metford in the Wildschutsberg. Afterwards our guns are examined, and they are the old Martinis. Our bullet does not fit the hole. Now, do you not see, you *eselkop*?”

“*Ja*, I see. But —*stil, man*. Here they come.”

A clink of the hoof of a shod horse coming down the track was borne faintly upward. The two assassins crouched in their ambush, a tigerish glare in their eyes. Their pieces were levelled.

“Ready, Hermanus,” whispered Gideon Roux. “When they come six paces the other side of yon white stone, then shoot.”

Chapter Eight. Tragical – And Aletta

Hans Vermaak had and had not carried out his instructions; which is to say that in so far as he had he had done so by halves.

By nature he was a genial soul was Hans Vermaak, by inclination a jovial one. He would not wantonly have hurt a fly or an Englishman, let alone so companionable a one as Colvin Kershaw; but then the terrible point to which racial hatred was worked up had engendered a feverish thirst for conspiring that was almost Celtic, in the stolid and pre-eminently practical Boer. The discovery of the concealed arms would be a serious thing, a very serious thing, but of its seriousness, great as that was, they took an exaggerated view. Inherently the Boer is a great respecter of the law and of the person of its representative or representatives, and most of these were sufficiently unsophisticated to look upon their undoubtedly treasonable proceeding as a hanging matter if brought to the notice of the authorities. Hence none felt any qualm as to the strong measures to be adopted towards the hostile sharer of the secret.

In vino Veritas! When we say that none felt a qualm we should have exempted Hans Vermaak – in his cups. The misgiving expressed by Gideon Roux as to the potential liberality of his spouse in the matter of the grog was not unfounded. There was enough in the bottle to make three Dutchmen – two would not partake – very lively, and the liveliest of all was Hans Vermaak. He became, moreover, enormously fraternal towards Colvin, who was deftly drawing him out, and finally did exactly as Gideon Roux had predicted, insisted upon his remaining the night, for he, Hans, was Gideon's brother-in-law, and therefore one of the family. He forgot the patriot cause, and only remembered it to declare that this was too good an Englishman to be shot, and so forth, which declaration under ordinary circumstances might mean nothing, but read by the light of subsequent events and the speaker's manner, Colvin took to mean rather a great deal.

The latter made several futile attempts at getting away, and at length succeeded. He himself, although he had borne his share, was in no wise affected by the liquor he had been taking – for the matter of that he could have drunk the lot of them under the table over and over again – and throughout the talk, which became more and more boisterous and unguarded, had kept an ear open and an eye keenly alive to every sign. But by the time he did break loose, and Gert was standing before the door with the horses saddled up, he realised that the more prudential side of his resolution had failed and that an infinitesimal portion of his homeward journey would be accomplished by daylight.

He had bidden good-bye all-round – not failing to observe during the process the awful look of scare upon the face of his hostess as she just touched his hand with a limp, moist paw. He had paced his horse about a hundred yards from the door, not sorry to see the last of the frowsy, dirty place, when he heard his name called. Turning in the saddle, he beheld the genial Hans hurrying towards him.

“Which way do you go home by?” said the Dutchman, somewhat flurriedly.

“Oh, the usual way, Hans.”

“So? You are going home, then.”

“Oh yes.”

“But you must not. Klip Poort is bad to go through at night *Ja*, it is bad, very bad. Go some other road. There is the road to Stephanus De la Rey's, for instance. Go by it.”

“But it is about twice the distance,” objected Colvin, who began to read considerable meaning into the other's anxiety regarding his movements.

“That matters nothing. Look, you are a good sort of Englishman and I like you. Klip Poort is bad to go through at night, very bad.”

“Very well, Hans, I'll take your advice. So long.”

Klip Poort, the point referred to, was a narrow, rugged defile overhung with large rocks, about five miles on his homeward way. As well as the road passing through, it likewise gave passage to the Sneeuw River, which, when full to any great extent, flooded the roadway to some depth. It might very well be to this form of danger that the Boer's hidden warning applied, and yet some unaccountable instinct warned Colvin that it was not.

“Gert.”

“Baas?”

“Did you hear what Hans Vermaak was saying just now?”

“Part of it, sir.”

“Why do you think he wanted us not to go back by way of Klip Poort?”

“I don't know, sir.”

“Gert, you are an ass.”

“Perhaps he thought the river might be ‘down,’ sir. The clouds are very thick and black up in the *bergen*.”

“Yes.”

An indescribable feeling of helpless apprehensiveness came over Colvin, and indeed it is a creepy thing the consciousness that at any step during the next half-dozen miles or so you are a target for a concealed enemy whose marksmanship is unerring. For this was about what he had reduced the situation to in his own mind, and within the same heartily anathematised the foolish curiosity which had moved him to go up and explore the hiding-place of the concealed arms. That Gideon Roux and his confederate were aware that he shared their secret he now believed. They must have waited to watch him, and have seen him come out of the cave; and with this idea the full force of Vermaak's warning came home to him.

But was that warning genuine? Was it not destined rather to induce him to take the other way? It was impossible to determine. Sorely perplexed, he rode on, thinking the matter over, and that deeply. The sky overhead grew darker and darker with the spread of a great cloud – the earth with the fall of evening. There was a moon, but it was obscured. By the time the rocks which marked the entrance to the poort came into view it was already night.

Two ways branched here – one his ordinary way home, the other that which Hans Vermaak had urged him to take. Some twenty feet down, at the bottom of a precipitous slope, was the river bed, dry save for a shallow, stagnant reach here and there. Which way should he take? Now was the time to decide.

“Get on, Aasvogel, you fool! Ah, would you, then?”

This to his horse, accompanied by a sharp rowelling with each heel. For the animal had stopped short with a suddenness calculated to unseat and certainly irritate the rider, and was backing and shying like the panic-stricken idiot it was; the cause of all this fluster being a white stone standing almost vertically up from the roadside, in the gloom looking for all the world like the traditional ghost.

“Whigge – whirr!” Something hummed through the air, and that so near he could feel the draught. Two jets of flame had darted forth from the hillside above, simultaneously with a dry, double crack. Two more followed, but had it been a hundred Colvin was utterly powerless to investigate, for his horse, which had already sprung forward beneath the sharp dig of the spurs, now took to wild and frantic flight, and for some moments was completely out of hand. By the time he got it in hand again he had been carried a good mile from the scene of this startling though not wholly unexpected occurrence.

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