H. Rider Haggard

Marie

original

Allan Quatermain

Генри Райдер Хаггард

Marie: An Episode in the Life of the Late Allan Quatermain

«РИПОЛ Классик»

1912

УДК 82
ББК 84

Хаггард Г.

Marie: An Episode in the Life of the Late Allan Quatermain /
Г. Хаггард — «РИПОЛ Классик», 1912 — (Allan Quatermain)

ISBN 978-5-521-06434-2

The youthful Allan Quatermain is bound for strange adventures, in the company of the ill-fated Pieter Retief and the Boer Commission, on an embassy to the Zulu despot, Dingaan. Yet he is bound, too, for one of the deepest romances of his life – for in Marie he tells of his courtship and marriage to his first wife, Marie Marais.

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Содержание

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Dedication

To Sir Henry Bulwer, G.C.M.G

Ditchingham, 1912.

My dear Sir Henry, —

Nearly thirty-seven years have gone by, more than a generation, since first we saw the shores of Southern Africa rising from the sea. Since then how much has happened: the Annexation of the Transvaal, the Zulu War, the first Boer War, the discovery of the Rand, the taking of Rhodesia, the second Boer War, and many other matters which in these quick- moving times are now reckoned as ancient history.

Alas! I fear that were we to re-visit that country we should find but few faces which we knew. Yet of one thing we may be glad. Those historical events, in some of which you, as the ruler of Natal, played a great part, and I, as it chanced, a smaller one, so far as we can foresee, have at length brought a period of peace to Southern Africa. To-day the flag of England flies from the Zambesi to the Cape. Beneath its shadow may all ancient feuds and blood jealousies be forgotten. May the natives prosper also and be justly ruled, for after all in the beginning the land was theirs. Such, I know, are your hopes, as they are mine.

It is, however, with an earlier Africa that this story deals. In 1836, hate and suspicion ran high between the Home Government and its Dutch subjects. Owing to the freeing of the slaves and mutual misunderstandings, the Cape Colony was then in tumult, almost in rebellion, and the Boers, by thousands, sought new homes in the unknown, savage-peopled North. Of this blood-stained time I have tried to tell; of the Great Trek and its tragedies, such as the massacre of the true-hearted Retief and his companions at the hands of the Zulu king, Dingaan.

But you have read the tale and know its substance. What, then, remains for me to say? Only that in memory of long-past days I dedicate it to you whose image ever springs to mind when I strive to picture an English gentleman as he should be. Your kindness I never shall forget; in memory of it, I offer you this book.

Ever sincerely yours,
H. RIDER HAGGARD.

Preface

The Author hopes that the reader may find some historical interest in the tale set out in these pages of the massacre of the Boer general, Retief, and his companions at the hands of the Zulu king, Dingaan. Save for some added circumstances, he believes it to be accurate in its details.

The same may be said of the account given of the hideous sufferings of the trek-Boers who wandered into the fever veld, there to perish in the neighbourhood of Delagoa Bay. Of these sufferings, especially those that were endured by Triechard and his companions, a few brief contemporary records still exist, buried in scarce works of reference. It may be mentioned, also, that it was a common belief among the Boers of that generation that the cruel death of Retief and his companions, and other misfortunes which befell them, were due to the treacherous plottings of an Englishman, or of Englishmen, with the despot, Dingaan.

Editor's Note

The following extract explains how the manuscript of "Marie," and with it some others, one of which is named "Child of Storm," came into the hands of the Editor.

It is from a letter, dated January 17th, 1909, and written by Mr. George Curtis, the brother of Sir Henry Curtis, Bart., who, it will be remembered, was one of the late Mr. Allan Quatermain's friends and companions in adventure when he discovered King Solomon's Mines, and who afterwards disappeared with him in Central Africa.

This extract runs as follows: -

"You may recall that our mutual and dear friend, old Allan Quatermain, left me the sole executor of his will, which he signed before he set out with my brother Henry for Zuvendis, where he was killed. The Court, however, not being satisfied that there was any legal proof of his death, invested the capital funds in trustee securities, and by my advice let his place in Yorkshire to a tenant who has remained in occupation of it during the last two decades. Now that tenant is dead, and at the earnest prayer of the Charities which benefit under Quatermain's will, and of myself—for in my uncertain state of health I have for long been most anxious to wind up this executorship—about eight months ago the Court at last consented to the distribution of this large fund in accordance with the terms of the will.

"This, of course, involved the sale of the real property, and before it was put up to auction I went over the house in company of the solicitor appointed by the Court. On the top landing, in the room Quatermain used to occupy, we found a sealed cupboard that I opened. It proved to be full of various articles which evidently he had prized because of their associations with his earthy life. These I need not enumerate here, especially as I have reserved them as his residuary legatee and, in the event of my death, they will pass to you under my will.

"Among these relics, however, I found a stout box, made of some red foreign wood, that contained various documents and letters and a bundle of manuscripts. Under the tape which fastened these manuscripts together, as you will see, is a scrap of paper on which is written, in blue pencil, a direction signed 'Allan Quatermain,' that in the event of anything happening to him, these MSS. are to be sent to you (for whom, as you know, he had a high regard), and that at your sole discretion you are to burn or publish them as you may see fit.

"So, after all these years, as we both remain alive, I carry out our old friend's instructions and send you his bequest, which I trust may prove of interest and value. I have read the MS. called 'Marie,' and certainly am of the opinion that it ought to be published, for I think it a strange and moving tale of a great love—full, moreover, of forgotten history.

"That named 'Child of Storm' also seems very interesting as a study of savage life, and the others may be the same; but my eyes are troubling me so much that I have not been able to decipher them. I hope, however, that I may be spared long enough to see them in print.

"Poor old Allan Quatermain. It is as though he had suddenly reappeared from the dead! So at least I thought as I perused these stories of a period of his life of which I do not remember his speaking to me.

"And now my responsibility in this matter is finished and yours begins. Do what you like about the manuscripts."

"George Curtis."

As may be imagined, I, the Editor, was considerably astonished when I received this letter and the accompanying bundle of closely- written MSS. To me also it was as though my old friend had risen from the grave and once more stood before me, telling some history of his stormy and tragic past in that quiet, measured voice that I have never been able to forget.

The first manuscript I read was that entitled “Marie.” It deals with Mr. Quatermain’s strange experiences when as a very young man he accompanied the ill-fated Pieter Retief and the Boer Commission on an embassy to the Zulu despot, Dingaan. This, it will be remembered, ended in their massacre, Quatermain himself and his Hottentot servant Hans being the sole survivors of the slaughter. Also it deals with another matter more personal to himself, namely, his courtship of and marriage to his first wife, Marie Marais.

Of this Marie I never heard him speak, save once. I remember that on a certain occasion—it was that of a garden fete for a local charity—I was standing by Quatermain when someone introduced to him a young girl who was staying in the neighborhood and had distinguished herself by singing very prettily at the fete. Her surname I forget, but her Christian name was Marie. He started when he heard it, and asked if she were French. The young lady answered No, but only of French extraction through her grandmother, who also was called Marie.

“Indeed?” he said. “Once I knew a maiden not unlike you who was also of French extraction and called Marie. May you prove more fortunate in life than she was, though better or nobler you can never be,” and he bowed to her in his simple, courtly fashion, then turned away. Afterwards, when we were alone, I asked him who was this Marie of whom he had spoken to the young lady. He paused a little, then answered:

“She was my first wife, but I beg you not to speak of her to me or to anyone else, for I cannot bear to hear her name. Perhaps you will learn all about her one day.” Then, to my grief and astonishment, he broke into something like a sob and abruptly left the room.

After reading the record of this Marie I can well understand why he was so moved. I print it practically as it left his hands.

There are other MSS. also, one of which, headed “Child of Storm,” relates the moving history of a beautiful and, I fear I must add, wicked Zulu girl named Mameena who did much evil in her day and went unrepentant from the world.

Another, amongst other things, tells the secret story of the causes of the defeat of Cetewayo and his armies by the English in 1879, which happened not long before Quatermain met Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good.

These three narratives are, indeed, more or less connected with each other. At least, a certain aged dwarf, called Zikali, a witch-doctor and an terrible man, has to do with all of them, although in the first, “Marie,” he is only vaguely mentioned in connection with the massacre of Retief, whereof he was doubtless the primary instigator. As “Marie” comes first in chronological order, and was placed on the top of the pile by its author, I publish it first. With the others I hope to deal later on, as I may find time and opportunity.

But the future must take care of itself. We cannot control it, and its events are not in our hand. Meanwhile, I hope that those who in their youth have read of King Solomon’s Mines and Zuvendis, and perhaps some others who are younger, may find as much of interest in these new chapters of the autobiography of Allan Quatermain as I have done myself.

Chapter 1
Allan Learns French

Although in my old age I, Allan Quatermain, have taken to writing —after a fashion—never yet have I set down a single word of the tale of my first love and of the adventures that are grouped around her beautiful and tragic history. I suppose this is because it has always seemed to me too holy and far-off a matter—as holy and far-off as is that heaven which holds the splendid spirit of Marie Marais. But now, in my age, that which was far-off draws near again; and at night, in the depths between the stars, sometimes I seem to see the opening doors through which I must pass, and leaning earthwards across their threshold, with outstretched arms and dark and dewy eyes, a shadow long forgotten by all save me—the shadow of Marie Marais.

An old man's dream, doubtless, no more. Still, I will try to set down that history which ended in so great a sacrifice, and one so worthy of record, though I hope that no human eye will read it until I also am forgotten, or, at any rate, have grown dim in the gathering mists of oblivion. And I am glad that I have waited to make this attempt, for it seems to me that only of late have I come to understand and appreciate at its true value the character of her of whom I tell, and the passionate affection which was her bounteous offering to one so utterly unworthy as myself. What have I done, I wonder, that to me should have been decreed the love of two such women as Marie and that of Stella, also now long dead, to whom alone in the world I told all her tale? I remember I feared lest she should take it ill, but this was not so. Indeed, during our brief married days, she thought and talked much of Marie, and some of her last words to me were that she was going to seek her, and that they would wait for me together in the land of love, pure and immortal.

So with Stella's death all that side of life came to an end for me, since during the long years which stretch between then and now I have never said another tender word to woman. I admit, however, that once, long afterwards, a certain little witch of a Zulu did say tender words to me, and for an hour or so almost turned my head, an art in which she had great skill. This I say because I wish to be quite honest, although it—I mean my head, for there was no heart involved in the matter—came straight again at once. Her name was Mameena, and I have set down her remarkable story elsewhere.

To return. As I have already written in another book, I passed my youth with my old father, a Church of England clergyman, in what is now the Cradock district of the Cape Colony.

Then it was a wild place enough, with a very small white population. Among our few neighbours was a Boer farmer of the name of Henri Marais, who lived about fifteen miles from our station, on a fine farm called Maraisfontein. I say he was a Boer, but, as may be guessed from both his Christian and surname, his origin was Huguenot, his forefather, who was also named Henri Marais—though I think the Marais was spelt rather differently then—having been one of the first of that faith who emigrated to South Africa to escape the cruelties of Louis XIV. at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Unlike most Boers of similar descent, these particular Marais— for, of course, there are many other families so called—never forgot their origin. Indeed, from father to son, they kept up some knowledge of the French tongue, and among themselves often spoke it after a fashion. At any rate, it was the habit of Henri Marais, who was excessively religious, to read his chapter of the Bible (which it is, or was, the custom of the Boers to spell out every morning, should their learning allow them to do so), not in the "taal" or patois Dutch, but in good old French. I have the very book from which he used to read now, for, curiously enough, in after years, when all these events had long been gathered to the past, I chanced to buy it among a parcel of other works at the weekly auction of odds and ends on the market square of Maritzburg. I remember that when I opened the great tome, bound over the original leather boards in buckskin, and discovered to whom it had belonged, I burst into tears. There

was no doubt about it, for, as was customary in old days, this Bible had sundry fly-leaves sewn up with it for the purpose of the recording of events important to its owner.

The first entries were made by the original Henri Marais, and record how he and his compatriots were driven from France, his father having lost his life in the religious persecutions. After this comes a long list of births, marriages and deaths continued from generation to generation, and amongst them a few notes telling of such matters as the change of the dwelling-places of the family, always in French. Towards the end of the list appears the entry of the birth of the Henri Marais whom I knew, alas! too well, and of his only sister. Then is written his marriage to Marie Labuschagne, also, be it noted, of the Huguenot stock. In the next year follows the birth of Marie Marais, my Marie, and, after a long interval, for no other children were born, the death of her mother. Immediately below appears the following curious passage:

> "Le 3 Janvier, 1836. Je quitte ce pays voulant me sauver du maudit gouvernement Britannique comme mes ancêtres se sont sauvés de ce diable—Louis XIV.
>
> "A bas les rois et les ministres tyrannique! Vive la liberté!"

Which indicates very clearly the character and the opinions of Henri Marais, and the feeling among the trek-Boers at that time.

Thus the record closes and the story of the Marais ends—that is, so far as the writings in the Bible go, for that branch of the family is now extinct.

Their last chapter I will tell in due course.

There was nothing remarkable about my introduction to Marie Marais. I did not rescue her from any attack of a wild beast or pull her out of a raging river in a fashion suited to romance. Indeed, we interchanged our young ideas across a small and extremely massive table, which, in fact, had once done duty as a block for the chopping up of meat. To this hour I can see the hundreds of lines running criss-cross upon its surface, especially those opposite to where I used to sit.

One day, several years after my father had emigrated to the Cape, the Heer Marais arrived at our house in search, I think, of some lost oxen. He was a thin, bearded man with rather wild, dark eyes set close together, and a quick nervous manner, not in the least like that of a Dutch Boer—or so I recall him. My father received him courteously and asked him to stop to dine, which he did.

They talked together in French, a tongue that my father knew well, although he had not used it for years; Dutch he could not, or, rather, would not, speak if he could help it, and Mr. Marais preferred not to talk English. To meet someone who could converse in French delighted him, and although his version of the language was that of two centuries before and my father's was largely derived from reading, they got on very well together, if not too fast.

At length, after a pause, Mr. Marais, pointing to myself, a small and stubbly-haired youth with a sharp nose, asked my father whether he would like me to be instructed in the French tongue. The answer was that nothing would please him better.

"Although," he added severely, "to judge by my own experience where Latin and Greek are concerned, I doubt his capacity to learn anything."

So an arrangement was made that I should go over for two days in each week to Maraisfontein, sleeping there on the intervening night, and acquire a knowledge of the French tongue from a tutor whom Mr. Marais had hired to instruct his daughter in that language and other subjects. I remember that my father agreed to pay a certain proportion of this tutor's salary, a plan which suited the thrifty Boer very well indeed.

Thither, accordingly, I went in due course, nothing loth, for on the veld between our station and Maraisfontein many pauw and koran—that is, big and small bustards—were to be found, to say nothing of occasional buck, and I was allowed to carry a gun, which even in those days I could use fairly well. So to Maraisfontein I rode on the appointed day, attended by a Hottentot after-rider, a

certain Hans, of whom I shall have a good deal to tell. I enjoyed very goof sport on the road, arriving at the stead laden with one pauw, two koran, and a little klipspringer buck which I had been lucky enough to shoot as it bounded out of some rocks in front of me.

There was a peach orchard planted round Maraisfontein, which just then was a mass of lovely pink blossom, and as I rode through it slowly, not being sure of my way to the house, a lanky child appeared in front of me, clad in a frock which exactly matched the colour of the peach bloom. I can see her now, her dark hair hanging down her back, and her big, shy eyes staring at me from the shadow of the Dutch "kappie" which she wore. Indeed, she seemed to be all eyes, like a "dikkop" or thick-headed plover; at any rate, I noted little else about her.

I pulled up my pony and stared at her, feeling very shy and not knowing what to say. For a while she stared back at me, being afflicted, presumably, with the same complaint, then spoke with an effort, in a voice that was very soft and pleasant.

"Are you the little Allan Quatermain who is coming to learn French with me?" she asked in Dutch.

"Of course," I answered in the same tongue, which I knew well; "but why do you call me little, missie? I am taller than you," I added indignantly, for when I was young my lack of height was always a sore point with me.

"I think not," she replied. "But get off that horse, and we will measure here against this wall."

So I dismounted, and, having assured herself that I had no heels to my boots (I was wearing the kind of raw-hide slippers that the Boers call "veld- shoon"), she took the writing slate which she was carrying—it had no frame, I remember, being, in fact, but a piece of the material used for roofing—and, pressing it down tight on my stubbly hair, which stuck up then as now, made a deep mark in the soft sandstone of the wall with the hard pointed pencil.

"There," she said, "that is justly done. Now, little Allan, it is your turn to measure me."

So I measured her, and, behold! she was the taller by a whole half- inch.

"You are standing on tiptoe," I said in my vexation.

"Little Allan," she replied, "to stand on tiptoe would be to lie before the good Lord, and when you come to know me better you will learn that, though I have a dreadful temper and many other sins, I do not lie."

I suppose that I looked snubbed and mortified, for she went on in her grave, grown-up way: "Why are you angry because God made me taller than you? especially as I am whole months older, for my father told me so. Come, let us write our names against these marks, so that in a year or two you may see how you outgrow me." Then with the slate pencil she scratched "Marie" against her mark very deeply, so that it might last, she said; after which I wrote "Allan" against mine.

Alas! Within the last dozen years chance took me past Maraisfontein once more. The house had long been rebuilt, but this particular wall yet stood. I rode to it and looked, and there faintly could still be seen the name Marie, against the little line, and by it the mark that I had made. My own name and with it subsequent measurements were gone, for in the intervening forty years or so the sandstone had flaked away in places. Only her autograph remained, and when I saw it I think that I felt even worse than I did on finding whose was the old Bible that I had bought upon the market square at Maritzburg.

I know that I rode away hurriedly without even stopping to inquire into whose hands the farm had passed. Through the peach orchard I rode, where the trees—perhaps the same, perhaps others—were once more in bloom, for the season of the year was that when Marie and I first met, nor did I draw rein for half a score of miles.

But here I may state that Marie always stayed just half an inch the taller in body, and how much taller in mind and spirit I cannot tell.

When we had finished our measuring match Marie turned to lead me to the house, and, pretending to observe for the first time the beautiful bustard and the two koran hanging from my saddle, also the klipspringer buck that Hans the Hottentot carried behind him on his horse, asked:

"Did you shoot all these, Allan Quatermain?"

"Yes," I answered proudly; "I killed them in four shots, and the pauw and koran were flying, not sitting, which is more than you could have done, although you are taller, Miss Marie."

"I do not know," she answered reflectively. "I can shoot very well with a rifle, for my father has taught me, but I never would shoot at living things unless I must because I was hungry, for I think that to kill is cruel. But, of course, it is different with men," she added hastily, "and no doubt you will be a great hunter one day, Allan Quatermain, since you can already aim so well."

"I hope so," I answered, blushing at the compliment, "for I love hunting, and when there are so many wild things it does not matter if we kill a few. I shot these for you and your father to eat."

"Come, then, and give them to him. He will thank you," and she led the way through the gate in the sandstone wall into the yard, where the outbuildings stood in which the riding horses and the best of the breeding cattle were kept at night, and so past the end of the long, one-storied house, that was stone-built and whitewashed, to the stoep or veranda in front of it.

On the broad stoep, which commanded a pleasant view over rolling, park- like country, where mimosa and other trees grew in clumps, two men were seated, drinking strong coffee, although it was not yet ten o'clock in the morning.

Hearing the sound of the horses, one of these, Mynheer Marais, whom I already knew, rose from his hide-strung chair. He was, as I think I have said, not in the least like one of the phlegmatic Boers, either in person or in temperament, but, rather, a typical Frenchman, although no member of his race had set foot in France for a hundred and fifty years. At least so I discovered afterwards, for, of course, in those days I knew nothing of Frenchmen.

His companion was also French, Leblanc by name, but of a very different stamp. In person he was short and stout. His large head was bald except for a fringe of curling, iron-grey hair which grew round it just above the ears and fell upon his shoulders, giving him the appearance of a tonsured but dishevelled priest. His eyes were blue and watery, his mouth was rather weak, and his cheeks were pale, full and flabby. When the Heer Marais rose, I, being an observant youth, noted that Monsieur Leblanc took the opportunity to stretch out a rather shaky hand and fill up his coffee cup out of a black bottle, which from the smell I judged to contain peach brandy.

In fact, it may as well be said at once that the poor man was a drunkard, which explains how he, with all his high education and great ability, came to hold the humble post of tutor on a remote Boer farm. Years before, when under the influence of drink, he had committed some crime in France —I don't know what it was, and never inquired—and fled to the Cape to avoid prosecution. Here he obtained a professorship at one of the colleges, but after a while appeared in the lecture-room quite drunk and lost his employment. The same thing happened in other towns, till at last he drifted to distant Maraisfontein, where his employer tolerated his weakness for the sake of the intellectual companionship for which something in his own nature seemed to crave. Also, he looked upon him as a compatriot in distress, and a great bond of union between them was their mutual and virulent hatred of England and the English, which in the case of Monsieur Leblanc, who in his youth had fought at Waterloo and been acquainted with the great Emperor, was not altogether unnatural.

Henri Marais's case was different, but of that I shall have more to say later.

"Ah, Marie," said her father, speaking in Dutch, "so you have found him at last," and he nodded towards me, adding: "You should be flattered, little man. Look you, this missie has been sitting for two hours in the sun waiting for you, although I told her you would not arrive much before ten o'clock, as your father the predicant said you would breakfast before you started. Well, it is natural, for she is lonely here, and you are of an age, although of a different race"; and his face darkened as he spoke the words.

"Father," answered Marie, whose blushes I could see even in the shadow of her cap, "I was not sitting in the sun, but under the shade of a peach tree. Also, I was working out the sums that Monsieur

Leblanc set me on my slate. See, here they are," and she held up the slate, which was covered with figures, somewhat smudged, it is true, by the rubbing of my stiff hair and of her cap.

Then Monsieur Leblanc broke in, speaking in French, of which, as it chanced I understood the sense, for my father had grounded me in that tongue, and I am naturally quick at modern languages. At any rate, I made out that he was asking if I was the little "cochon d'anglais," or English pig, whom for his sins he had to teach. He added that he judged I must be, as my hair stuck up on my head—I had taken off my hat out of politeness—as it naturally would do on a pig's back.

This was too much for me, so, before either of the others could speak, I answered in Dutch, for rage made me eloquent and bold:

"Yes, I am he; but, mynheer, if you are to be my master, I hope you will not call the English pigs any more to me."

"Indeed, gamin" (that is, little scamp), "and pray, what will happen if I am so bold as to repeat that truth?"

"I think, mynheer," I replied, growing white with rage at this new insult, "the same that has happened to yonder buck," and I pointed to the klipspringer behind Hans's saddle. "I mean that I shall shoot you."

"Peste! Au moins il a du courage, cet enfant" (At least the child is plucky), exclaimed Monsieur Leblanc, astonished. From that moment, I may add, he respected me, and never again insulted my country to my face.

Then Marais broke out, speaking in Dutch that I might understand:

"It is you who should be called pig, Leblanc, not this boy, for, early as it is, you have been drinking. Look! the brandy bottle is half empty. Is that the example you set to the young? Speak so again and I turn you out to starve on the veld. Allan Quatermain, although, as you may have heard, I do not like the English, I beg your pardon. I hope you will forgive the words this sot spoke, thinking that you did not understand," and he took off his hat and bowed to me quite in a grand manner, as his ancestors might have done to a king of France.

Leblanc's face fell. Then he rose and walked away rather unsteadily; as I learned afterwards, to plunge his head in a tub of cold water and swallow a pint of new milk, which were his favourite antidotes after too much strong drink. At any rate, when he appeared again, half an hour later, to begin out lesson, he was quite sober, and extremely polite.

When he had gone, my childish anger being appeased, I presented the Heer Marais with my father's compliments, also with the buck and the birds, whereof the latter seemed to please him more than the former. Then my saddle-bags were taken to my room, a little cupboard of a place next to that occupied by Monsieur Leblanc, and Hans was sent to turn the horses out with the others belonging to the farm, having first knee-haltered them tightly, so that they should not run away home.

This done, the Heer Marais showed me the room in which we were to have our lessons, one of the "sitkammer", or sitting chambers, whereof, unlike most Boer stead, this house boasted two. I remember that the floor was made of "daga", that is, ant-heap earth mixed with cow-dung, into which thousands of peach-stones had been thrown while it was still soft, in order to resist footwear —a rude but fairly efficient expedient, and one not unpleasing to the eye. For the rest, there was one window opening on to the veranda, which, in that bright climate, admitted a shaded but sufficient light, especially as it always stood open; the ceiling was of unplastered reeds; a large bookcase stood in the corner containing many French works, most of them the property of Monsieur Leblanc, and in the centre of the room was the strong, rough table made of native yellow-wood, that once had served as a butcher's block. I recollect also a coloured print of the great Napoleon commanding at some battle in which he was victorious, seated upon a white horse and waving a field-marshal's baton over piles of dead and wounded; and near the window, hanging to the reeds of the ceiling, the nest of a pair of red-tailed swallows, pretty creatures that, notwithstanding the mess they made, afforded to Marie and me endless amusement in the intervals of our work.

When, on that day, I shuffled shyly into this homely place, and, thinking myself alone there, fell to examining it, suddenly I was brought to a standstill by a curious choking sound which seemed to proceed from the shadows behind the bookcase. Wondering as to its cause, I advanced cautiously to discover a pink-clad shape standing in the corner like a naughty child, with her head resting against the wall, and sobbing slowly.

"Marie Marais, why do you cry?" I asked.

She turned, tossing back the locks of long, black hair which hung about her face, and answered:

"Allan Quatermain, I cry because of the shame which has been put upon you and upon our house by that drunken Frenchman."

"What of that?" I asked. "He only called me a pig, but I think I have shown him that even a pig has tusks."

"Yes," she replied, "but it was not you he meant; it was all the English, whom he hates; and the worst of it is that my father is of his mind. He, too, hates the English, and, oh! I am sure that trouble will come of his hatred, trouble and death to many."

"Well, if so, we have nothing to do with it, have we?" I replied with the cheerfulness of extreme youth.

"What makes you so sure?" she said solemnly. "Hush! here comes Monsieur Leblanc."

Chapter 2
The Attack on Maraisfontein

I do not propose to set out the history of the years which I spent in acquiring a knowledge of French and various other subjects, under the tuition of the learned but prejudiced Monsieur Leblanc. Indeed, there is “none to tell, sir.” When Monsieur Leblanc was sober, he was a most excellent and well- informed tutor, although one apt to digress into many side issues, which in themselves were not uninstructive. When tipsy, he grew excited and harangued us, generally upon politics and religion, or rather its reverse, for he was an advanced freethinker, although this was a side to his character which, however intoxicated he might be, he always managed to conceal from the Heer Marais. I may add that a certain childish code of honour prevented us from betraying his views on this and sundry other matters. When absolutely drunk, which, on an average, was not more than once a month, he simply slept, and we did what we pleased—a fact which our childish code of honour also prevented us from betraying.

But, on the whole, we got on very well together, for, after the incident of our first meeting, Monsieur Leblanc was always polite to me. Marie he adored, as did every one about the place, from her father down to the meanest slave. Need I add that I adored her more than all of them put together, first with the love that some children have for each other, and afterwards, as we became adult, with that wider love by which it is at once transcended and made complete. Strange would it have been if this were not so, seeing that we spent nearly half of every week practically alone together, and that, from the first, Marie, whose nature was as open as the clear noon, never concealed her affection for me. True, it was a very discreet affection, almost sisterly, or even motherly, in its outward and visible aspects, as though she could never forget that extra half-inch of height or month or two of age.

Moreover, from a child she was a woman, as an Irishman might say, for circumstances and character had shaped her thus. Not much more than a year before we met, her mother, whose only child she was, and whom she loved with all her strong and passionate heart, died after a lingering illness, leaving her in charge of her father and his house. I think it was this heavy bereavement in early youth which coloured her nature with a grey tinge of sadness and made her seem so much older than her years.

So the time went on, I worshipping Marie in my secret thought, but saying nothing about it, and Marie talking of and acting towards me as though I were her dear younger brother. Nobody, not even her father or mine, or Monsieur Leblanc, took the slightest notice of this queer relationship, or seemed to dream that it might lead to ultimate complications which, in fact, would have been very distasteful to them all for reasons that I will explain.

Needless to say, in due course, as they were bound to do, those complications arose, and under pressure of great physical and moral excitement the truth came out. It happened thus.

Every reader of the history of the Cape Colony has heard of the great Kaffir War of 1835. That war took place for the most part in the districts of Albany and Somerset, so that we inhabitants of Cradock, on the whole, suffered little. Therefore, with the natural optimism and carelessness of danger of dwellers in wild places, we began to think ourselves fairly safe from attack. Indeed, so we should have been, had it not been for a foolish action on the part of Monsieur Leblanc.

It seems that on a certain Sunday, a day that I always spent at home with my father, Monsieur Leblanc rode out alone to some hills about five miles distant from Maraisfontein. He had often been cautioned that this was an unsafe thing to do, but the truth is that the foolish man thought he had found a rich copper mine in these hills, and was anxious that no one should share his secret. Therefore, on Sundays, when there were no lessons, and the Heer Marais was in the habit of celebrating family prayers, which Leblanc disliked, it was customary for him to ride to these hills and there collect

geological specimens and locate the strike of his copper vein. On this particular Sabbath, which was very hot, after he had done whatever he intended to do, he dismounted from his horse, a tame old beast. Leaving it loose, he partook of the meal he had brought with him, which seems to have included a bottle of peach brandy that induced slumber.

Waking up towards evening, he found that his horse had gone, and at once jumped to the conclusion that it had been stolen by Kaffirs, although in truth the animal had but strolled over a ridge in search of grass. Running hither and thither to seek it, he presently crossed this ridge and met the horse, apparently being led away by two of the Red Kaffirs, who, as was usual, were armed with assegais. As a matter of fact these men had found the beast, and, knowing well to whom it belonged, were seeking its owner, whom, earlier in the day, they had seen upon the hills, in order to restore it to him. This, however, never occurred to the mind of Monsieur Leblanc, excited as it was by the fumes of the peach brandy.

Lifting the double-barrelled gun he carried, he fired at the first Kaffir, a young man who chanced to be the eldest son and heir of the chief of the tribe, and, as the range was very close, shot him dead. Thereon his companion, leaving go of the horse, ran for his life. At him Leblanc fired also, wounding him slightly in the thigh, but no more, so that he escaped to tell the tale of what he and every other native for miles round considered a wanton and premeditated murder. The deed done, the fiery old Frenchman mounted his nag and rode quietly home. On the road, however, as the peach brandy evaporated from his brain, doubts entered it, with the result that he determined to say nothing of his adventure to Henri Marais, who he knew was particularly anxious to avoid any cause of quarrel with the Kaffirs.

So he kept his own counsel and went to bed. Before he was up next morning the Heer Marais, suspecting neither trouble nor danger, had ridden off to a farm thirty miles or more away to pay its owner for some cattle which he had recently bought, leaving his home and his daughter quite unprotected, except by Leblanc and the few native servants, who were really slaves, that lived about the place.

Now on the Monday night I went to bed as usual, and slept, as I have always done through life, like a top, till about four in the morning, when I was awakened by someone tapping at the glass of my window. Slipping from the bed, I felt for my pistol, as it was quite dark, crept to the window, opened it, and keeping my head below the level of the sill, fearing lest its appearance should be greeted with an assegai, asked who was there.

“Me, baas,” said the voice of Hans, our Hottentot servant, who, it will be remembered, had accompanied me as after-rider when first I went to Maraisfontein. “I have bad news. Listen. The baas knows that I have been out searching for the red cow which was lost. Well, I found her, and was sleeping by her side under a tree on the veld when, about two hours ago, a woman whom I know came up to my camp fire and woke me. I asked her what she was doing at that hour of the night, and she answered that she had come to tell me something. She said that some young men of the tribe of the chief Quabie, who lives in the hills yonder, had been visiting at their kraal, and that a few hours before a messenger had arrived from the chief saying that they must return at once, as this morning at dawn he and all his men were going to attack Maraisfontein and kill everyone in it and take the cattle!”

“Good God!” I ejaculated. “Why?”

“Because, young baas,” drawled the Hottentot from the other side of the window, “because someone from Maraisfontein—I think it was the Vulture” (the natives gave this name to Leblanc on account of his bald head and hooked nose)—”shot Quabie’s son on Sunday when he was holding his horse.”

“Good God!” I said again, “the old fool must have been drunk. When did you say the attack was to be—at dawn?” and I glanced at the stars, adding, “Why, that will be within less than an hour, and the Baas Marais is away.”

"Yes," croaked Hans; "and Missie Marie—think of what the Red Kaffirs will do with Missie Marie when their blood is up."

I thrust my fist through the window and struck the Hottentot's toad-like face on which the starlight gleamed faintly.

"Dog!" I said, "saddle my mare and the roan horse and get your gun. In two minutes I come. Be swift or I kill you."

"I go," he answered, and shot out into the night like a frightened snake.

Then I began to dress, shouting as I dressed, till my father and the Kaffirs ran into the room. As I threw on my things I told them all.

"Send out messengers," I said, "to Marais—he is at Botha's farm —and to all the neighbours. Send, for your lives; gather up the friendly Kaffirs and ride like hell for Maraisfontein. Don't talk to me, father; don't talk! Go and do what I tell you. Stay! Give me two guns, fill the saddle-bags with powder tins and loopers, and tie them to my mare. Oh! be quick, be quick!"

Now at length they understood, and flew this way and that with candles and lanterns. Two minutes later—it could scarcely have been more —I was in front of the stables just as Hans led out the bay mare, a famous beast that for two years I had saved all my money to buy. Someone strapped on the saddle-bags while I tested the girths; someone else appeared with the stout roan stallion that I knew would follow the mare to the death. There was not time to saddle him, so Hans clambered on to his back like a monkey, holding two guns under his arm, for I carried but one and my double-barrelled pistol.

"Send off the messengers," I shouted to my father. "If you would see me again send them swiftly, and follow with every man you can raise."

Then we were away with fifteen miles to do and five-and-thirty minutes before the dawn.

"Softly up the slope," I said to Hans, "till the beasts get their wind, and then ride as you never rode before."

Those first two miles of rising ground! I thought we should never come to the end of them, and yet I dared not let the mare out lest she should bucket herself. Happily she and her companion, the stallion—a most enduring horse, though not so very swift—had stood idle for the last thirty hours, and, of course, had not eaten or drunk since sunset. Therefore being in fine fettle, they were keen for the business; also we were light weights.

I held in the mare as she spurted up the rise, and the horse kept his pace to hers. We reached its crest, and before us lay the great level plain, eleven miles of it, and then two miles down hill to Maraisfontein.

"Now," I said to Hans, shaking loose the reins, "keep up if you can!"

Away sped the mare till the keen air of the night sung past my ears, and behind her strained the good roan horse with the Hottentot monkey on its back. Oh! what a ride was that!

Further I have gone for a like cause, but never at such speed, for I knew the strength of the beasts and how long it would last them. Half an hour of it they might endure; more, and at this pace they must founder or die.

And yet such was the agony of my fear, that it seemed to me as though I only crept along the ground like a tortoise.

The roan was left behind, the sound of his foot-beats died away, and I was alone with the night and my fear. Mile added itself to mile, for now and again the starlight showed me a stone or the skeleton of some dead beast that I knew. Once I dashed into a herd of trekking game so suddenly, that a springbok, unable to stop itself, leapt right over me. Once the mare put her foot in an ant-bear hole and nearly fell, but recovered herself—thanks be to God, unharmed—and I worked myself back into the saddle whence I had been almost shaken. If I had fallen; oh! if I had fallen!

We were near the end of the flat, and she began to fail. I had over- pressed her; the pace was too tremendous. Her speed lessened to an ordinary fast gallop as she faced the gentle rise that led to

the brow. And now, behind me, once more I heard the sound of the hoofs of the roan. The tireless beast was coming up. By the time we reached the edge of the plateau he was quite near, not fifty yards behind, for I heard him whinny faintly.

Then began the descent. The morning star was setting, the east grew grey with light. Oh! could we get there before the dawn? Could we get there before the dawn? That is what my horse's hoofs beat out to me.

Now I could see the mass of the trees about the stead. And now I dashed into something, though until I was through it, I did not know that it was a line of men, for the faint light gleamed upon the spear of one of them who had been overthrown!

So it was no lie! The Kaffirs were there! As I thought it, a fresh horror filled my heart; perhaps their murdering work was already done and they were departing.

The minute of suspense—or was it but seconds?—seemed an eternity. But it ended at last. Now I was at the door in the high wall that enclosed the outbuildings at the back of the house, and there, by an inspiration, pulled up the mare—glad enough she was to stop, poor thing—for it occurred to me that if I rode to the front I should very probably be assegaied and of no further use. I tried the door, which was made of stout stinkwood planks. By design, or accident, it had been left unbolted. As I thrust it open Hans arrived with a rush, clinging to the roan with his face hidden in its mane. The beast pulled up by the side of the mare which it had been pursuing, and in the faint light I saw that an assegai was fixed in its flank.

Five seconds later we were in the yard and locking and barring the door behind us. Then, snatching the saddle-bags of ammunition from the horses, we left them standing there, and I ran for the back entrance of the house, bidding Hans rouse the natives, who slept in the outbuildings, and follow with them. If any one of them showed signs of treachery he was to shoot him at once. I remember that as I went I tore the spear out of the stallion's flank and brought it away with me.

Now I was hammering upon the back door of the house, which I could not open. After a pause that seemed long, a window was thrown wide, and a voice —it was Marie's—asked in frightened tones who was there.

"I, Allan Quatermain," I answered. "Open at once, Marie. You are in great danger; the Red Kaffirs are going to attack the house."

She flew to the door in her nightdress, and at length I was in the place.

"Thank God! you are still safe," I gasped. "Put on your clothes while I call Leblanc. No, stay, do you call him; I must wait here for Hans and your slaves."

Away she sped without a word, and presently Hans arrived, bringing with him eight frightened men, who as yet scarcely knew whether they slept or woke.

"Is that all?" I asked. "Then bar the door and follow me to the 'sitkammer', where the baas keeps his guns."

Just as we reached it, Leblanc entered, clad in his shirt and trousers, and was followed presently by Marie with a candle.

"What is it?" he asked.

I took the candle from Marie's hand, and set it on the floor close to the wall, lest it should prove a target for an assegai or a bullet. Even in those days the Kaffirs had a few firearms, for the most part captured or stolen from white men. Then in a few words I told them all.

"And when did you learn all this?" asked Leblanc in French.

"At the Mission Station a little more than half an hour ago," I answered, looking at my watch.

"At the station a little more than half an hour ago! Peste! it is not possible. You dream or are drunken," he cried excitedly.

"All right, monsieur, we will argue afterwards," I answered. "Meanwhile the Kaffirs are here, for I rode through them; and if you want to save your life, stop talking and act. Marie, how many guns are there?"

"Four," she answered, "of my father's; two 'roers' and two smaller ones."

"And how many of these men"—and I pointed to the Kaffirs —"can shoot?"

"Three well and one badly, Allan."

"Good," I said. "Let them load the guns with 'loopers'"—that is, slugs, not bullets—"and let the rest stand in the passage with their assegais, in case the Quabies should try to force the back door."

Now, in this house there were in all but six windows, one to each sitting- room, one to each of the larger bedrooms, these four opening on to the veranda, and one at either end of the house, to give light and air to the two small bedrooms, which were approached through the larger bedrooms. At the back, fortunately, there were no windows, for the stead was but one room deep with passage running from the front to the back door, a distance of little over fifteen feet.

As soon as the guns were loaded I divided up the men, a man with a gun at each window. The right-hand sitting-room window I took myself with two guns, Marie coming with me to load, which, like all girls in that wild country, she could do well enough. So we arranged ourselves in a rough-and-ready fashion, and while we were doing it felt quite cheerful—that is, all except Monsieur Leblanc, who, I noticed, seemed very much disturbed.

I do not for one moment mean to suggest that he was afraid, as he might well have been, for he was an extremely brave and even rash man; but I think the knowledge that his drunken act had brought this terrible danger upon us all weighed on his mind. Also there may have been more; some subtle fore-knowledge of the approaching end to a life that, when all allowances were made, could scarcely be called well spent. At any rate he fidgeted at his window-place cursing beneath his breath, and soon, as I saw out of the corner of my eye, began to have recourse to his favourite bottle of peach brandy, which he fetched out of a cupboard.

The slaves, too, were gloomy, as all natives are when suddenly awakened in the night; but as the light grew they became more cheerful. It is a poor Kaffir that does not love fighting, especially when he has a gun and a white man or two to lead him.

Now that we had made such little preparations as we could, which, by the way, I supplemented by causing some furniture to be piled up against the front and back doors, there came a pause, which, speaking for my own part— being, after all, only a lad at the time—I found very trying to the nerves. There I stood at my window with the two guns, one a double-barrel and one a single "roer", or elephant gun, that took a tremendous charge, but both, be it remembered, flint locks; for, although percussion caps had been introduced, we were a little behind the times in Cradock. There, too, crouched on the ground beside me, holding the ammunition ready for re-loading, her long, black hair flowing about her shoulders, was Marie Marais, now a well-grown young woman. In the intense silence she whispered to me:

"Why did you come here, Allan? You were safe yonder, and now you will probably be killed."

"To try to save you," I answered simply. "What would you have had me do?"

"To try to save me? Oh! that is good of you, but you should have thought of yourself."

"Then I should still have thought of you, Marie."

"Why, Allan?"

"Because you are myself and more than myself. If anything happened to you, what would my life be to me?"

"I don't quite understand, Allan," she replied, staring down at the floor. "Tell me, what do you mean?"

"Mean, you silly girl," I said; "what can I mean, except that I love you, which I thought you knew long ago."

"Oh!" she said; "*now* I understand." Then she raised herself upon her knees, and held up her face to me to kiss, adding, "There, that's my answer, the first and perhaps the last. Thank you, Allan dear; I am glad to have heard that, for you see one or both of us may die soon."

As she spoke the words, an assegai flashed through the window-place, passing just between our heads. So we gave over love-making and turned our attention to war.

Now the light was beginning to grow, flowing out of the pearly eastern sky; but no attack had yet been delivered, although that one was imminent that spear fixed in the plaster of the wall behind us showed clearly. Perhaps the Kaffirs had been frightened by the galloping of horses through their line in the dark, not knowing how many of them there might have been. Or perhaps they were waiting to see better where to deliver their onset. These were the ideas that occurred to me, but both were wrong.

They were staying their hands until the mist lifted a little from the hollow below the stead where the cattle kraals were situated, for while the fog remained they could not see to get the beasts out. These they wished to make sure of and drive away before the fight began, lest during its progress something should happen to rob them of their booty.

Presently, from these kraals, where the Heer Marais's horned beasts and sheep were penned at night, about one hundred and fifty of the former and some two thousand of the latter, to say nothing of the horses, for he was a large and prosperous farmer, there arose a sound of bellowing, neighing, and baaing, and with it that of the shouting of men.

"They are driving off the stock," said Marie. "Oh! my poor father, he is ruined; it will break his heart."

"Bad enough," I answered, "but there are things that might be worse. Hark!"

As I spoke there came a sound of stamping feet and of a wild war chant. Then in the edge of the mist that hung above the hollow where the cattle kraals were, figures appeared, moving swiftly to and fro, looking ghostly and unreal. The Kaffirs were marshalling their men for the attack. A minute more and it had begun. On up the slope they came in long, wavering lines, several hundreds of them, whistling and screaming, shaking their spears, their war-plumes and hair trappings blown back by the breeze, the lust of slaughter in their rolling eyes. Two or three of them had guns, which they fired as they ran, but where the bullets went I do not know, over the house probably.

I called out to Leblanc and the Kaffirs not to shoot till I did, for I knew that they were poor marksmen and that much depended upon our first volley being effective. Then as the captain of this attack came within thirty yards of the stoep—for now the light, growing swiftly, was strong enough to enable me to distinguish him by his apparel and the rifle which he held —I loosed at him with the "roer" and shot him dead. Indeed the heavy bullet passing through his body mortally wounded another of the Quabies behind. These were the first men that I ever killed in war.

As they fell, Leblanc and the rest of our people fired also, the slugs from their guns doing great execution at that range, which was just long enough to allow them to scatter. When the smoke cleared a little I saw that nearly a dozen men were down, and that the rest, dismayed by this reception, had halted. If they had come on then, while we were loading, doubtless they might have rushed the place; but, being unused to the terrible effects of firearms, they paused, amazed. A number of them, twenty or thirty perhaps, clustered about the bodies of the fallen Kaffirs, and, seizing my second gun, I fired both barrels at these with such fearful effect that the whole regiment took to their heels and fled, leaving their dead and wounded on the ground. As they ran our servants cheered, but I called to them to be silent and load swiftly, knowing well that the enemy would soon return.

For a time, however, nothing happened, although we could hear them talking somewhere near the cattle kraal, about a hundred and fifty yards away. Marie took advantage of this pause, I remember, to fetch food and distribute it among us. I, for one, was glad enough to get it.

Now the sun was up, a sight for which I thanked Heaven, for, at any rate, we could no longer be surprised. Also, with the daylight, some of my fear passed away, since darkness always makes danger twice as terrible to man and beast. Whilst we were still eating and fortifying the window-places as best we could, so as to make them difficult to enter, a single Kaffir appeared, waving above his head a stick to which was tied a white ox-tail as a sign of truce. I ordered that no one should fire, and

when the man, who was a bold fellow, had reached the spot where the dead captain lay, called to him, asking his business, for I could speak his language well.

He answered that he had come with a message from Quabie. This was the message: that Quabie's eldest son had been cruelly murdered by the fat white man called "Vulture" who lived with the Heer Marais, and that he, Quabie, would have blood for blood. Still, he did not wish to kill the young white chieftainess (that was Marie) or the others in the house, with whom he had no quarrel. Therefore if we would give up the fat white man that he might make him "die slowly," Quabie would be content with his life and with the cattle that he had already taken by way of a fine, and leave us and the house unmolested.

Now, when Leblanc understood the nature of this offer he went perfectly mad with mingled fear and rage, and began to shout and swear in French.

"Be silent," I said; "we do not mean to surrender you, although you have brought all this trouble on us. Your chance of life is as good as ours. Are you not ashamed to act so before these black people?"

When at last he grew more or less quiet I called to the messenger that we white folk were not in the habit of abandoning each other, and that we would live or die together. Still, I bade him tell Quabie that if we did die, the vengeance taken on him and all his people would be to wipe them out till not one of them was left, and therefore that he would do well not to cause any of our blood to flow. Also, I added, that we had thirty men in the house (which, of course, was a lie) and plenty of ammunition and food, so that if he chose to continue the attack it would be the worse for him and his tribe.

On hearing this the herald shouted back that we should every one of us be dead before noon if he had his way. Still, he would report my words faithfully to Quabie and bring his answer.

Then he turned and began to walk off. Just as he did so a shot was fired from the house, and the man pitched forward to the ground, then rose again and staggered back towards his people, with his right shoulder shattered and his arm swinging.

"Who did that?" I asked through the smoke, which prevented me from seeing.

"I, parbleu!" shouted Leblanc. "Sapristi! that black devil wanted to torture me, Leblanc, the friend of the great Napoleon. Well, at least I have tortured him whom I meant to kill."

"Yes, you fool," I answered; "and we, too, shall be tortured because of your wickedness. You have shot a messenger carrying a flag of truce, and that the Quabies will never forgive. Oh! I tell you that you have hit us as well as him, who had it not been for you might have been spared."

These words I said quite quietly and in Dutch, so that our Kaffirs might understand them, though really I was boiling with wrath.

But Leblanc did not answer quietly.

"Who are you," he shouted, "you wretched little Englishman, who dare to lecture me, Leblanc, the friend of the great Napoleon?"

Now I drew my pistol and walked up to the man.

"Be quiet, you drunken sot," I said, for I guessed that he had drunk more of the brandy in the darkness. "If you are not quiet and do not obey me, who am in command here, either I will blow your brains out, or I will give you to these men," and I pointed to Hans and the Kaffirs, who had gathered round him, muttering ominously. "Do you know what they will do with you? They will throw you out of the house, and leave you to settle your quarrel with Quabie alone."

Leblanc looked first at the pistol, and next at the faces of the natives, and saw something in one or other of them, or in both, that caused him to change his note.

"Pardon, monsieur," he said; "I was excited. I knew not what I said. If you are young you are brave and clever, and I will obey you," and he went to his station and began to re-load his gun. As he did so a great shout of fury rose from the cattle kraal. The wounded herald had reached the Quabies and was telling them of the treachery of the white people.

Chapter 3
The Rescue

The second Quabie advance did not begin till about half-past seven. Even savages love their lives and appreciate the fact that wounds hurt very much, and these were no exception to the rule. Their first rush had taught them a bitter lesson, of which the fruit was evident in the crippled or dying men who rolled to and fro baked in the hot sun within a few yards of the stoep, not to speak of those who would never stir again. Now, the space around the house being quite open and bare of cover, it was obvious that it could not be stormed without further heavy losses. In order to avoid such losses a civilised people would have advanced by means of trenches, but of these the Quabies knew nothing; moreover, digging tools were lacking to them.

So it came about that they hit upon another, and in the circumstances a not inefficient expedient. The cattle kraal was built of rough, unmortared stones. Those stones they took, each man carrying two or three, which, rushing forward, they piled up into scattered rough defences of about eighteen inches or two feet high. These defences were instantly occupied by as many warriors as could take shelter behind them, lying one on top of the other. Of course, those savages who carried the first stones were exposed to our fire, with the result that many of them fell, but there were always plenty more behind. As they were being built at a dozen different points, and we had but seven guns, before we could reload, a particular schanz, of which perhaps the first builders had fallen, would be raised so high that our slugs could no longer hurt those who lay behind it. Also, our supply of ammunition was limited, and the constant expenditure wasted it so much that at length only about six charges per man remained. At last, indeed, I was obliged to order the firing to cease, so that we might reserve ourselves for the great rush which could not now be much delayed.

Finding that they were no longer harassed by our bullets, the Quabies advanced more rapidly, directing their attack upon the south end of the house, where there was but one window, and thus avoiding the fire that might be poured upon them from the various openings under the veranda. At first I wondered why they selected this end, till Marie reminded me that this part of the dwelling was thatched with reeds, whereas the rest of the building, which had been erected more recently, was slated.

Their object was to fire the roof. So soon as their last wall was near enough (that is, about half-past ten of the clock) they began to throw into the thatch assegais to which were attached bunches of burning grass. Many of these went out, but at length, as we gathered from their shouts, one caught. Within ten minutes this part of the house was burning.

Now our state became desperate. We retreated across the central passage, fearing lest the blazing rafters should fall upon our natives, who were losing heart and would no longer stay beneath them. But the Quabies, more bold, clambered in through the south window, and attacked us in the doorway of the larger sitting-room.

Here the final fight began. As they rushed at us we shot, till they went down in heaps. Almost at our last charge they gave back, and just then the roof fell upon them.

Oh, what a terrible scene was that! The dense clouds of smoke, the screams of the trapped and burning men, the turmoil, the agony!

The front door was burst in by a flank onslaught.

Leblanc and a slave who was near him were seized by black, claw-like hands and dragged out. What became of the Frenchman I do not know, for the natives hauled him away, but I fear his end must have been dreadful, as he was taken alive. The servant I saw them assegai, so at least he died at once. I fired my last shot, killing a fellow who was flourishing a battle-axe, then dashed the butt of the gun into the face of the man behind him, felling him, and, seizing Marie by the hand, dragged her

back into the northernmost room —that in which I was accustomed to sleep—and shut and barred the door.

"Allan," she gasped, " Allan dear, it is finished. I cannot fall into the hands of those men. Kill me, Allan."

"All right," I answered, "I will. I have my pistol. One barrel for you and one for me."

"No, no! Perhaps you might escape after all; but, you see, I am a woman, and dare not risk it. Come now, I am ready," and she knelt down, opening her arms to receive the embrace of death, and looked up at me with her lovely, pitiful eyes.

"It doesn't do to kill one's love and live on oneself," I answered hoarsely. "We have got to go together," and I cocked both barrels of the pistol.

The Hottentot, Hans, who was in the place with us, saw and understood.

"It is right, it is best!" he said; and turning, he hid his eyes with his hand.

"Wait a little, Allan," she exclaimed; "it will be time when the door is down, and perhaps God may still help us."

"He may," I answered doubtfully; "but I would not count on it. Nothing can save us now unless the others come to rescue us, and that's too much to hope for."

Then a thought struck me, and I added with a dreadful laugh: "I wonder where we shall be in five minutes."

"Oh! together, dear; together for always in some new and beautiful world, for you do love me, don't you, as I love you? Maybe that's better than living on here where we should be sure to have troubles and perhaps be separated at last."

I nodded my head, for though I loved life, I loved Marie more, and I felt that we were making a good end after a brave fight. They were battering at the door now, but, thank Heaven, Marais had made strong doors, and it held a while.

The wood began to give at last, an assegai appeared through a shattered plank, but Hans stabbed along the line of it with the spear he held, that which I had snatched from the flank of the horse, and it was dropped with a scream. Black hands were thrust through the hole, and the Hottentot hacked and cut at them with the spear. But others came, more than he could pierce, and the whole door-frame began to be dragged outwards.

"Now, Marie, be ready," I gasped, lifting the pistol.

"Oh, Christ receive me!" she answered faintly. "It won't hurt much, will it, Allan?"

"You will never feel anything," I whispered; as with the cold sweat pouring from me I placed the muzzle within an inch of her forehead and began to press the trigger. My God! yes, I actually began to press the trigger softly and steadily, for I wished to make no mistake.

It was at this very moment, above the dreadful turmoil of the roaring flames, the yells of the savages and the shrieks and groans of wounded and dying men, that I heard the sweetest sound which ever fell upon my ears —the sound of shots being fired, many shots, and quite close by.

"Great Heaven!" I screamed; "the Boers are here to save us. Marie, I will hold the door while I can. If I fall, scramble through the window—you can do it from the chest beneath—drop to the ground, and run towards the firing. There's a chance for you yet, a good chance."

"And you, you," she moaned. "I would rather die with you."

"Do what I bid you," I answered savagely, and bounded forward towards the rocking door.

It was falling outward, it fell, and on the top of it appeared two great savages waving broad spears. I lifted the pistol, and the bullet that had been meant for Marie's brain scattered that of the first of them, and the bullet which had been meant for my heart pierced that of the second. They both went down dead, there in the doorway.

I snatched up one of their spears and glanced behind me. Marie was climbing on to the chest; I could just see her through the thickening smoke. Another Quabie rushed on. Hans and I received him on the points of our assegais, but so fierce was his charge that they went through him as though he

were nothing, and being but light, both of us were thrown backwards to the ground. I scrambled to my feet again, defenceless now, for the spear was broken in the Kaffir, and awaited the end. Looking back once more I saw that Marie had either failed to get through the window or abandoned the attempt. At any rate she was standing near the chest supporting herself by her right hand. In my despair I seized the blade end of the broken assegai and dragged it from the body of the Kaffir, thinking that it would serve to kill her, then turned to do the deed.

But even as I turned I heard a voice that I knew well shout: "Do you live, Marie?" and in the doorway appeared no savage, but Henri Marais.

Slowly I backed before him, for I could not speak, and the last dreadful effort of my will seemed to thrust me towards Marie. I reached her and threw my hand that still held the gory blade round her neck. Then as darkness came over me I heard her cry:

"Don't shoot, father. It is Allan, Allan who has saved my life!"

After that I remember no more. Nor did she for a while, for we both fell to the ground senseless.

When my senses returned to me I found myself lying on the floor of the wagon-house in the back yard. Glancing from my half-opened eyes, for I was still speechless, I saw Marie, white as a sheet, her hair all falling about her dishevelled dress. She was seated on one of those boxes that we put on the front of wagons to drive from, "voorkissies" they are called, and as her eyes were watching me I knew that she lived. By her stood a tall and dark young man whom I had never seen before. He was holding her hand and looking at her anxiously, and even then I felt angry with him. Also I saw other things; for instance, my old father leaning down and looking at *me* anxiously, and outside in the yard, for there were no doors to the wagon-house, a number of men with guns in their hands, some of whom I knew and others who were strangers. In the shadow, too, against the wall, stood my blood mare with her head hanging down and trembling all over. Not far from her the roan lay upon the ground, its flank quite red.

I tried to rise and could not, then feeling pain in my left thigh, looked and saw that it was red also. As a matter of fact an assegai had gone half through it and hit upon the bone. Although I never felt it at the time, this wound was dealt to me by that great Quabie whom Hans and I had received upon our spears, doubtless as he fell. Hans, by the way, was there also, an awful and yet a ludicrous spectacle, for the Quabie had fallen right on the top of him and lain so with results that may, be imagined. There he sat upon the ground, looking upwards, gasping with his fish-like mouth. Each gasp, I remember, fashioned itself into the word "Allemachte!" that is "Almighty," a favourite Dutch expression.

Marie was the first to perceive that I had come to life again. Shaking herself free from the clasp of the young man, she staggered towards me and fell upon her knees at my side, muttering words that I could not catch, for they choked in her throat. Then Hans took in the situation, and wriggling his unpleasant self to my other side, lifted my hand and kissed it. Next my father spoke, saying:

"Praise be to God, he lives! Allan, my son, I am proud of you; you have done your duty as an Englishman should."

"Had to save my own skin if I could, thank you, father," I muttered.

"Why as an Englishman more than any other sort of man, Mynheer Predicant?" asked the tall stranger, speaking in Dutch, although he evidently understood our language.

"The point is one that I will not argue now, sir," answered my father, drawing himself up. "But if what I hear is true, there was a Frenchman in that house who did not do his duty; and if you belong to the same nation, I apologise to you."

"Thank you, sir; as it happens, I do, half. The rest of me is Portuguese, not English, thank God."

"God is thanked for many things that must surprise Him," replied my father in a suave voice.

At that moment this rather disagreeable conversation, which even then both angered and amused me faintly, came to an end, for the Heer Marais entered the place.

As might have been expected in so excitable a man, he was in a terrible state of agitation. Thankfulness at the escape of his only, beloved child, rage with the Kaffirs who had tried to kill her, and extreme distress at the loss of most of his property—all these conflicting emotions boiled together in his breast like antagonistic elements in a crucible.

The resulting fumes were parti-coloured and overpowering. He rushed up to me, blessed and thanked me (for he had learnt something of the story of the defence), called me a young hero and so forth, hoping that God would reward me. Here I may remark that *he* never did, poor man. Then he began to rave at Leblanc, who had brought all this dreadful disaster upon his house, saying that it was a judgement on himself for having sheltered an atheist and a drunkard for so many years, just because he was French and a man of intellect. Someone, my father as a matter of fact, who with all his prejudices possessed a great sense of justice, reminded him that the poor Frenchman had expiated, or perchance was now expiating any crimes that he might have committed.

This turned the stream of his invective on to the Quabie Kaffirs, who had burned part of his house and stolen nearly all his stock, making him from a rich man into a poor one in a single hour. He shouted for vengeance on the "black devils," and called on all there to help him to recover his beasts and kill the thieves. Most of those present—they were about thirty in all, not counting the Kaffir and Hottentot after-riders—answered that they were willing to attack the Quabies. Being residents in the district, they felt, and, indeed, said, that his case to-day might and probably would be their case to-morrow. Therefore they were prepared to ride at once.

Then it was that my father intervened.

"Heeren," he said, "it seems to me that before you seek vengeance, which, as the Book tells us, is the Lord's, it would be well, especially for the Heer Marais, to return thanks for what has been saved to him. I mean his daughter, who might now very easily have been dead or worse."

He added that goods came or went according to the chances of fortune, but a beloved human life, once lost, could not be restored. This precious life had been preserved to him, he would not say by man—here he glanced at me —but by the Ruler of the world acting through man. Perhaps those present did not quite understand what he (my father) had learned from Hans the Hottentot, that I, his son, had been about to blow out the brains of Marie Marais and my own when the sound of the shots of those who had been gathered through the warning which I left before I rode from the Mission Station, had stayed my hand. He called upon the said Hans and Marie herself to tell them the story, since I was too weak to do so.

Thus adjured, the little Hottentot, smothered as he was in blood, stood up. In the simple, dramatic style characteristic of his race, he narrated all that had happened since he met the woman on the veld but little over twelve hours before, till the arrival of the rescue party. Never have I seen a tale followed with deeper interest, and when at last Hans pointed to me lying on the ground and said, "There is he who did these things which it might be thought no man could do—he, but a boy," even from those phlegmatic Dutchmen there came a general cheer. But, lifting myself upon my hands, I called out:

"Whatever I did, this poor Hottentot did also, and had it not been for him I could not have done anything—for him and the two good horses."

Then they cheered again, and Marie, rising, said:

"Yes, father; to these two I owe my life."

After this, my father offered his prayer of thanksgiving in very bad Dutch—for, having begun to learn it late in life, he never could really master that language—and the stalwart Boers, kneeling round him, said "Amen." As the reader may imagine, the scene, with all its details, which I will not repeat, was both remarkable and impressive.

What followed this prayer I do not very well remember, for I became faint from exhaustion and the loss of blood. I believe, however, that the fire having been extinguished, they removed the dead and wounded from the unburnt portion of the house and carried me into the little room where

Marie and I had gone through that dreadful scene when I went within an ace of killing her. After this the Boers and Marais's Kaffirs, or rather slaves, whom he had collected from where they lived away from the house, to the number of thirty or forty, started to follow the defeated Quabie, leaving about ten of their number as a guard. Here I may mention that of the seven or eight men who slept in the outbuildings and had fought with us, two were killed in the fight and two wounded. The remainder, one way or another, managed to escape unhurt, so that in all this fearful struggle, in which we inflicted so terrible a punishment upon the Kaffirs, we lost only three slain, including the Frenchman, Leblanc.

As to the events of the next three days I know only what I have been told, for practically during all that time I was off my head from loss of blood, complicated with fever brought on by the fearful excitement and exertion I had undergone. All I can recall is a vision of Marie bending over me and making me take food of some sort—milk or soup, I suppose—for it seems I would touch it from no other hand. Also I had visions of the tall shape of my white-haired father, who, like most missionaries, understood something of surgery and medicine, attending to the bandages on my thigh. Afterwards he told me that the spear had actually cut the walls of the big artery, but, by good fortune, without going through them. Another fortieth of an inch and I should have bled to death in ten minutes!

On this third day my mind was brought back from its wanderings by the sound of a great noise about the house, above which I heard the voice of Marais storming and shouting, and that of my father trying to calm him. Presently Marie entered the room, drawing-to behind her a Kaffir karoos, which served as a curtain, for the door, it will be remembered, had been torn out. Seeing that I was awake and reasonable, she flew to my side with a little cry of joy, and, kneeling down, kissed me on the forehead.

"You have been very ill, Allan, but I know you will recover now. While we are alone, which," she added slowly and with meaning, "I dare say we shall not be much in future, I want to thank you from my heart for all that you did to save me. Had it not been for you, oh! had it not been for you"—and she glanced at the blood stains on the earthen floor, put her hands before her eyes and shuddered.

"Nonsense, Marie," I answered, taking her hand feebly enough, for I was very weak. "Anyone else would have done as much, even if they did not love you as I do. Let us thank God that it was not in vain. But what is all that noise? Have the Quabies come back?"

She shook her head.

"No; the Boers have come back from hunting them."

"And did they catch them and recover the cattle?"

"Not so. They only found some wounded men, whom they shot, and the body of Monsieur Leblanc with his head cut off, taken away with other bits of him for medicine, they say to make the warriors brave. Quabie has burnt his kraal and fled with all his people to join the other Kaffirs in the Big Mountains. Not a cow or a sheep did they find, except a few that had fallen exhausted, and those had their throats cut. My father wanted to follow them and attack the Red Kaffirs in the mountains, but the others would not go. They said there are thousands of them, and that it would be a mad war, from which not one of them would return alive. He is wild with grief and rage, for, Allan dear, we are almost ruined, especially as the British Government are freeing the slaves and only going to give us a very small price, not a third of their value. But, hark! he is calling me, and you must not talk much or excite yourself, lest you should be ill again. Now you have to sleep and eat and get strong. Afterwards, dear, you may talk"; and, bending down once more, she blessed and kissed me, then rose and glided away.

Chapter 4
Hernando Pereira

Several more days passed before I was allowed out of that little war- stained room of which I grew to hate the very sight. I entreated my father to take me into the air, but he would not, saying that he feared lest any movement should cause the bleeding to begin again or even the cut artery to burst. Moreover, the wound was not hearing very well, the spear that caused it having been dirty or perhaps used to skin dead animals, which caused some dread of gangrene, that in those days generally meant death. As it chanced, although I was treated only with cold water, for antiseptics were then unknown, my young and healthy blood triumphed and no gangrene appeared.

What made those days even duller was that during them I saw very little of Marie, who now only entered the place in the company of her father. Once I managed to ask her why she did not come oftener and alone. Her face grew troubled as she whispered back, “Because it is not allowed, Allan,” and then without another word left the place.

Why, I wondered to myself, was it not allowed, and an answer sprang up in my mind. Doubtless it was because of that tall young man who had argued with my father in the wagon-house. Marie had never spoken to me of him, but from the Hottentot Hans and my father I managed to collect a good deal of information concerning him and his business.

It appeared that he was the only child of Henri Marais’s sister, who married a Portuguese from Delagoa Bay of the name of Pereira, who had come to the Cape Colony to trade many years before and settled there. Both he and his wife were dead, and their son, Hernando, Marie’s cousin, had inherited all their very considerable wealth.

Indeed, now I remembered having heard this Hernando, or Hernan, as the Boers called him for short, spoken of in past years by the Heer Marais as the heir to great riches, since his father had made a large fortune by trading in wine and spirits under some Government monopoly which he held. Often he had been invited to visit Maraisfontein, but his parents, who doted on him and lived in one of the settled districts not far from Cape Town, would never allow him to travel so far from them into these wild regions.

Since their death, however, things had changed. It appeared that on the decease of old Pereira the Governor of the Colony had withdrawn the wine and spirit monopoly, which he said was a job and a scandal, an act that made Hernando Pereira very angry, although he needed no more money, and had caused him to throw himself heart and soul into the schemes of the disaffected Boers. Indeed, he was now engaged as one of the organisers of the Great Trek which was in contemplation. In fact, it had already begun, into the partially explored land beyond the borders of the Colony, where the Dutch farmers proposed to set up dominions of their own.

That was the story of Hernando Pereira, who was to be—nay, who had already become—my rival for the hand of the sweet and beautiful Marie Marais.

One night when my father and I were alone in the little room where he slept with me, and he had finished reading his evening portion of Scripture aloud, I plucked up my courage to tell him that I loved Marie and wished to marry her, and that we had plighted our troth during the attack of the Kaffirs on the stead.

“Love and war indeed!” he said, looking at me gravely, but showing no sign of surprise, for it appeared that he was already acquainted with our secret. This was not wonderful, for he informed me afterwards that during my delirium I had done nothing except rave of Marie in the most endearing terms. Also Marie herself, when I was at my worst, had burst into tears before him and told him straight out that she loved me.

"Love and war indeed!" he repeated, adding kindly, "My poor boy, I fear that you have fallen into great trouble."

"Why, father?" I asked. "Is it wrong that we should love each other?"

"Not wrong, but, in the circumstances, quite natural—I should have foreseen that it was sure to happen. No, not wrong, but most unfortunate. To begin with, I do not wish to see you marry a foreigner and become mixed up with these disloyal Boers. I hoped that one day, a good many years hence, for you are only a boy, Allan, you would find an English wife, and I still hope it."

"Never!" I ejaculated.

"Never is a long word, Allan, and I dare say that what you are so sure is impossible will happen after all," words that made me angry enough at the time, though in after years I often thought of them.

"But," he went on, "putting my own wishes, perhaps prejudices, aside, I think your suit hopeless. Although Henri Marais likes you well enough and is grateful to you just now because you have saved the daughter whom he loves, you must remember that he hates us English bitterly. I believe that he would almost as soon see his girl marry a half-caste as an Englishman, and especially a poor Englishman, as you are, and unless you can make money, must remain. I have little to leave you, Allan."

"I might make money, father, out of ivory, for instance. You know I am a good shot."

"Allan, I do not think you will ever make much money, it is not in your blood; or, if you do, you will not keep it. We are an old race, and I know our record, up to the time of Henry VIII. at any rate. Not one of us was ever commercially successful. Let us suppose, however, that you should prove yourself the exception to the rule, it can't be done at once, can it? Fortunes don't grow in a night, like mushrooms."

"No, I suppose not, father. Still, one might have some luck."

"Possibly. But meanwhile you have to fight against a man who has the luck, or rather the money in his pocket."

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up.

"I mean Hernando Pereira, Allan, Marais's nephew, who they say is one of the richest men in the Colony. I know that he wishes to marry Marie."

"How do you know it, father?"

"Because Marais told me so this afternoon, probably with a purpose. He was struck with her beauty when he first saw her after your escape, which he had not done since she was a child, and as he stopped to guard the house while the rest went after the Quabies—well, you can guess. Such things go quickly with these Southern men."

I hid my face in the pillow, biting my lips to keep back the groan that was ready to burst from them, for I felt the hopelessness of the situation. How could I compete with this rich and fortunate man, who naturally would be favoured of my betrothed's father? Then on the blackness of my despair rose a star of hope. I could not, but perchance Marie might. She was very strong- natured and very faithful. She was not to be bought, and I doubted whether she could be frightened.

"Father," I said, "I may never marry Marie, but I don't think that Hernando Pereira ever will either."

"Why not, my boy?"

"Because she loves me, father, and she is not one to change. I believe that she would rather die."

"Then she must be a very unusual sort of woman. Still, it may be so; the future will tell to those who live to see it. I can only pray and trust that whatever happens will be for the best for both of you. She is a sweet girl and I like her well, although she may be Boer—or French. And now, Allan, we have talked enough, and you had better go to sleep. You must not excite yourself, you know, or it may set up new inflammation in the wound."

"Go to sleep. Must not excite yourself." I kept muttering those words for hours, serving them up in my mind with a spice of bitter thought. At last torpor, or weakness, overcame me, and I fell

into a kind of net of bad dreams which, thank Heaven! I have now forgotten. Yet when certain events happened subsequently I always thought, and indeed still think, that these or something like them, had been a part of those evil dreams.

On the morning following this conversation I was at length allowed to be carried to the stoep, where they laid me down, wrapped in a very dirty blanket, upon a rimpi-strung bench or primitive sofa. When I had satisfied my first delight at seeing the sun and breathing the fresh air, I began to study my surroundings. In front of the house, or what remained of it, so arranged that the last of them at either end we made fast to the extremities of the stoep, was arranged an arc of wagons, placed as they are in a laager and protected underneath by earth thrown up in a mound and by boughs of the mimosa thorn. Evidently these wagons, in which the guard of Boers and armed natives who still remained on the place slept at night, were set thus as a defence against a possible attack by the Quabies or other Kaffirs.

During the daytime, however, the centre wagon was drawn a little on one side to leave a kind of gate. Through this opening I saw that a long wall, also semicircular, had been built outside of them, enclosing a space large enough to contain at night all the cattle and horses that were left to the Heer Marais, together with those of his friends, who evidently did not wish to see their oxen vanish into the depths of the mountains. In the middle of this extemporised kraal was a long, low mound, which, as I learned afterwards, contained the dead who fell in the attack on the house. The two slaves who had been killed in the defence were buried in the little garden that Marie had made, and the headless body of Leblanc in a small walled place to the right of the stead, where lay some of its former owners and one or two relatives of the Heer Marais, including his wife.

Whilst I was noting these things Marie appeared at the end of the veranda, having come round the burnt part of the house, followed by Hernan Pereira. Catching sight of me, she ran to the side of my couch with outstretched arms as though she intended to embrace me. Then seeming to remember, stopped suddenly at my side, coloured to her hair, and said in an embarrassed voice:

"Oh, Heer Allan"—she had never called me Heer in her life before —"I am so glad to find you out! How have you been getting on?"

"Pretty well, I thank you," I answered, biting my lips, "as you would have learnt, Marie, had you come to see me."

Next moment I was sorry for the words, for I saw her eyes fill with tears and her breast shake with something like a sob. However, it was Pereira and not Marie who answered, for at the moment I believe she could not speak.

"My good boy," he said in a pompous, patronising way and in English, which he knew perfectly, "I think that my cousin has had plenty to do caring for all these people during the last few days without running to look at the cut in your leg. However, I am glad to hear from your worthy father that it is almost well and that you will soon be able to play games again, like others of your age."

Now it was my turn to be unable to speak and to feel my eyes fill with tears, tears of rage, for remember that I was still very feeble. But Marie spoke for me.

"Yes, Cousin Hernan," she said in a cold voice, "thank God the Heer Allan Quatermain will soon be able to play games again, such bloody games as the defence of Maraisfontein with eight men against all the Quabie horde. Then Heaven help those who stand in front of his rifle," and she glanced at the mound that covered the dead Kaffirs, many of whom, as a matter of fact, I had killed.

"Oh! no offence, no offence, Marie," said Pereira in his smooth, rich voice. "I did not want to laugh at your young friend, who doubtless is as brave as they say all Englishmen are, and who fought well when he was lucky enough to have the chance of protecting you, my dear cousin. But after all, you know, he is not the only one who can hold a gun straight, as you seem to think, which I shall be happy to prove to him in a friendly fashion when he is stronger."

Here he stepped forward a pace and looked down at me, then added with a laugh, “Allemachte! I fear that won’t be just at present. Why, the lad looks as though one might blow him away like a feather.”

Still I said nothing, only glanced up at this tall and splendid man standing above me in his fine clothes, for he was richly dressed as the fashion of the time went, with his high colouring, broad shoulders, and face full of health and vigour. Mentally I compared him with myself, as I was after my fever and loss of blood, a poor, white-faced rat of a lad, with stubbly brown hair on my head and only a little down on my chin, with arms like sticks, and a dirty blanket for raiment. How could I compare with him in any way? What chance had I against this opulent bully who hated me and all my race, and in whose hands, even if I were well, I should be nothing but a child?

And yet, and yet as I lay there humiliated and a mock, an answer came into my mind, and I felt that whatever might be the case with my outward form; in spirit, in courage, in determination and in ability, in all, in short, that really makes a man, I was more than Pereira’s equal. Yes, and that by the help of these qualities, poor as I was and frail as I seemed to be, I would beat him at the last and keep for myself what I had won, the prize of Marie’s love.

Such were the thoughts which passed through me, and I think that something of the tenor of them communicated itself to Marie, who often could read my heart before my lips spoke. At any rate, her demeanour changed. She drew herself up. Her fine nostrils expanded and a proud look came into her dark eyes, as she nodded her head and murmured in a voice so low that I think I alone caught her words:

“Yes, yes, have no fear.”

Pereira was speaking again (he had turned aside to strike the steel of his tinder-box, and was now blowing the spark to a glow before lighting his big pipe).

“By the way, Heer Allan,” he said, “that is a very good mare of yours. She seems to have done the distance between the Mission Station and Maraisfontein in wonderful time, as, for the matter of that, the roan did too. I have taken a fancy to her, after a gallop on her back yesterday just to give her some exercise, and although I don’t know that she is quite up to my weight, I’ll buy her.”

“The mare is not for sale, Heer Pereira,” I said, speaking for the first time, “and I do not remember giving anyone leave to exercise her.”

“No, your father did, or was it that ugly little beast of a Hottentot? I forget which. As for her not being for sale—why, in this world everything is for sale, at a price. I’ll give you—let me see—oh, what does the money matter when one has plenty? I’ll give you a hundred English pounds for that mare; and don’t you think me a fool. I tell you I mean to get it back, and more, at the great races down in the south. Now what do you say?”

“I say that the mare is not for sale, Heer Pereira.” Then a thought struck me, or an inspiration, and, as has always been my fashion, I acted on it at once. “But,” I added slowly, “if you like, when I am a bit stronger I’ll shoot you a match for her, you staking your hundred pounds and I staking the mare.”

Pereira burst out laughing.

“Here, friends,” he called to some of the Boers who were strolling up to the house for their morning coffee. “This little Englishman wants to shoot a match with me, staking that fine mare of his against a hundred pounds British; against me, Hernando Pereira, who have won every prize at shooting that ever I entered for. No, no, friend Allan, I am not a thief, I will not rob you of your mare.”

Now among those Boers chanced to be the celebrated Heer Pieter Retief, a very fine man of high character, then in the prime of life, and of Huguenot descent like Heer Marais. He had been appointed by the Government one of the frontier commandants, but owing to some quarrel with the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Andries Stockenstrom, had recently resigned that office, and at this date was engaged in organizing the trek from the Colony. I now saw Retief for the first time, and ah! then little did I think how and where I should see him for the last. But all that is a matter of history, of which I shall have to tell later.

Now, while Pereira was mocking and bragging of his prowess, Pieter Retief looked at me, and our eyes met.

"Allemachte!" he exclaimed, "is that the young man who, with half a dozen miserable Hottentots and slaves, held this stead for five hours against all the Quabie tribe and kept them out?"

Somebody said that it was, remarking that I had been about to shoot Marie Marais and myself when help came.

"Then, Heer Allan Quatermain," said Retief, "give me your hand," and he took my poor wasted fingers in his big palm, adding, "Your father must be proud of you to-day, as I should be if I had such a son. God in Heaven! where will you stop if you can go so far while you are yet a boy? Friends, since I came here yesterday I have got the whole story for myself from the Kaffirs and from this 'mooi meisje'" (pretty young lady), and he nodded towards Marie. "Also I have gone over the ground and the house, and have seen where each man fell —it is easy by the blood marks—most of them shot by yonder Englishman, except one of the last three, whom he killed with a spear. Well, I tell you that never in all my experience have I known a better arranged or a more finely carried out defence against huge odds. Perhaps the best part of it, too, was the way in which this young lion acted on the information he received and the splendid ride he made from the Mission Station. Again I say that his father should be proud of him."

"Well, if it comes to that, I am, mynheer," said my father, who just then joined us after his morning walk, "although I beg you to say no more lest the lad should grow vain."

"Bah!" replied Retief, "fellows of his stamp are not vain; it is your big talkers who are vain," and he glanced out of the corner of his shrewd eye at Pereira, "your turkey cocks with all their tails spread. I think this little chap must be such another as that great sailor of yours—what do you call him, Nelson?—who beat the French into frothed eggs and died to live for ever. He was small, too, they say, and weak in the stomach."

I must confess I do not think that praise ever sounded sweeter in my ears than did these words of the Commandant Retief, uttered as they were just when I felt crushed to the dirt. Moreover, as I saw by Marie's and, I may add, by my father's face, there were other ears to which they were not ungrateful. The Boers also, brave and honest men enough, evidently appreciated them, for they said:

"Ja! ja! das ist recht" (That is right).

Only Pereira turned his broad back and busied himself with relighting his pipe, which had gone out.

Then Retief began again.

"What is it you were calling us to listen to, Mynheer Pereira? That this Heer Allan Quatermain had offered to shoot you a match? Well, why not? If he can hit Kaffirs running at him with spears, as he has done, he may be able to hit other things also. You say that you won't rob him of his money —no, it was his beautiful horse—because you have taken so many prizes shooting at targets. But did *you* ever hit a Kaffir running at *you* with an assegai, mynheer, you who live down there where everything is safe? If so, I never heard of it."

Pereira answered that he did not understand me to propose a shooting match at Kaffirs charging with assegais, but at something else—he knew not what.

"Quite so," said Retief. "Well, Mynheer Allan, what is it that you do propose?"

"That we should stand in the great kloof between the two *vleis* yonder—the Heer Marais knows the place—when the wild geese flight over an hour before sunset, and that he who brings down six of them in the fewest shots shall win the match."

"If our guns are loaded with loopers that will not be difficult," said Pereira.

"With loopers you would seldom kill a bird, mynheer," I replied, "for they come over from seventy to a hundred yards up. No, I mean with rifles."

"Allemachte!" broke in a Boer; "you will want plenty of ammunition to hit a goose at that height with a bullet."

"That is my offer," I said, "to which I add this, that when twenty shots have been fired by each man, he who has killed the most birds wins, even if he has not brought down the full six. Does the Heer Pereira accept? If so, I will venture to match myself against him, although he has won so many prizes."

The Heer Pereira seemed extremely doubtful; so doubtful, indeed, that the Boers began to laugh at him. In the end he grew rather angry, and said that he was willing to shoot me at bucks or swallows, or fireflies, or anything else I liked.

"Then let it be at geese," I answered, "since it is likely to be sometime before I am strong enough to ride after buck or other wild things.'"

So the terms of the match were formally written down by Marie, as my father, although he took a keen sporting interest in the result, would have nothing to do with what he called a "wager for money," and, except myself, there was no one else present with sufficient scholarship to pen a long document. Then we both signed them, Hernan Pereira not very willingly, I thought; and if my recovery was sufficiently rapid, the date was fixed for that day week. In case of any disagreement, the Heer Retief, who was staying at Maraisfontein, or in its neighbourhood, for a while, was appointed referee and stakeholder. It was also arranged that neither of us should visit the appointed place, or shoot at the geese before the match. Still we were at liberty to practise as much as we liked at anything else in the interval and to make use of any kind of rifle that suited us best.

By the time that these arrangements were finished, feeling quite tired with all the emotions of the morning, I was carried back to my room. Here my midday meal, cooked by Marie, was brought to me. As I finished eating it, for the fresh air had given me an appetite, my father came in, accompanied by the Heer Marais, and began to talk to me. Presently the latter asked me kindly enough if I thought I should be sufficiently strong to trek back to the station that afternoon in an ox-cart with springs to it and lying at full length upon a hide-strung "cartel" or mattress.

I answered, "Certainly," as I should have done had I been at the point of death, for I saw that he wished to be rid of me.

"The fact is, Allan," he said awkwardly, "I am not inhospitable as you may think, especially towards one to whom I owe so much. But you and my nephew, Hernan, do not seem to get on very well together, and, as you may guess, having just been almost beggared, I desire no unpleasantness with the only rich member of my family."

I replied I was sure I did not wish to be the cause of any. It seemed to me, however, that the Heer Pereira wished to make a mock of me and to bring it home to me what a poor creature I was compared to himself—I a mere sick boy who was worth nothing.

"I know," said Marais uneasily, "my nephew has been too fortunate in life, and is somewhat overbearing in his manner. He does not remember that the battle is not always to the strong or the race to the swift, he who is young and rich and handsome, a spoiled child from the first. I am sorry, but what I cannot help I must put up with. If I cannot have my mealies cooked, I must eat them green. Also, Allan, have you never heard that jealousy sometimes makes people rude and unjust?" and he looked at me meaningly.

I made no answer, for when one does not quite know what to say it is often best to remain silent, and he went on:

"I am vexed to hear of this foolish shooting match which has been entered into without my knowledge or consent. if he wins he will only laugh at you the more, and if you win he will be angry."

"It was not my fault, mynheer," I answered. "He wanted to force me to sell the mare, which he had been riding without my leave, and kept bragging about his marksmanship. So at last I grew cross and challenged him."

"No wonder, Allan; I do not blame you. Still, you are silly, for it will not matter to him if he loses his money; but that beautiful mare is your ewe- lamb, and I should be sorry to see you parted

from a beast which has done us so good a turn. Well, there it is; perhaps circumstances may yet put an end to this trial; I hope so."

"I hope they won't," I answered stubbornly.

"I dare say you do, being sore as a galled horse just now. But listen, Allan, and you, too, Predicant Quatermain; there are other and more important reasons than this petty squabble why I should be glad if you could go away for a while. I must take counsel with my countrymen about certain secret matters which have to do with our welfare and future, and, of course they would not like it if all the while there were two Englishmen on the place, whom they might think were spies."

"Say no more, Heer Marais," broke in my father hotly; "still less should we like to be where we are not wanted or are looked upon with suspicion for the crime of being English. By God's blessing, my son has been able to do some service to you and yours, but now that is all finished and forgotten. Let the cart you are so kind as to lend us be inspanned. We will go at once."

Then Henri Marais, who was a gentleman at bottom, although, even in those early days, violent and foolish when excited or under the influence of his race prejudices, began to apologise quite humbly, assuring my father that he forgot nothing and meant no offence. So they patched the matter up, and an hour later we started.

All the Boers came to see us off, giving me many kind words and saying how much they looked forward to meeting me again on the following Thursday. Pereira, who was among them, was also very genial, begging me to be sure and get well, since he did not wish to beat one who was still crippled, even at a game of goose shooting. I answered that I would do my best; as for my part, I did not like being beaten it any game which I had set my heart on winning, whether it were little or big. Then I turned my head, for I was lying on my back all this time, to bid good-bye to Marie, who had slipped out of the house into the yard where the cart was.

"Good-bye, Allan," she said, giving me her hand and a look from her eyes that I trusted was not seen. Then, under pretence of arranging the kaross which was over me, she bent down and whispered swiftly:

"Win that match if you love me. I shall pray God that you may every night, for it will be an omen."

I think the whisper was heard, though not the words, for I saw Pereira bite his lip and make a movement as though to interrupt her. But Pieter Retief thrust his big form in front of him rather rudely, and said with one of his hearty laughs:

"Allemachte! friend, let the missje wish a good journey to the young fellow who saved her life."

Next moment Hans, the Hottentot, screamed at the oxen in the usual fashion, and we rolled away through the gate.

But oh! if I had liked the Heer Retief before, now I loved him.

Chapter 5
The Shooting Match

My journey back to the Mission Station was a strange contrast to that which I had made thence a few days before. Then, the darkness, the swift mare beneath me rushing through it like a bird, the awful terror in my heart lest I should be too late, as with wild eyes I watched the paling stars and the first gathering grey of dawn. Now, the creaking of the ox-cart, the familiar veld, the bright glow of the peaceful sunlight, and in my heart a great thankfulness, and yet a new terror lest the pure and holy love which I had won should be stolen away from me by force or fraud.

Well, as the one matter had been in the hand of God, so was the other, and with that knowledge I must be content. The first trial had ended in death and victory. How would the second end? I wondered, and those words seemed to jumble themselves up in my mind and shape a sentence that it did not conceive. It was: "In the victory that is death," which, when I came to think of it, of course, meant nothing. How victory could be death I did not understand— at any rate, at that time, I who was but a lad of small experience.

As we trekked along comfortably enough, for the road was good and the cart, being on springs, gave my leg no pain, I asked my father what he thought that the Heer Marais had meant when he told us that the Boers had business at Maraisfontein, during which our presence as Englishmen would not be agreeable to them.

"Meant, Allan? He meant that these traitorous Dutchmen are plotting against their sovereign, and are afraid lest we should report their treason. Either they intend to rebel because of that most righteous act, the freeing of the slaves, and because we will not kill out all the Kaffirs with whom they chance to quarrel, or to trek from the Colony. For my part I think it will be the latter, for, as you have heard, some parties have already gone; and, unless I am mistaken, many more mean to follow, Marais and Retief and that plotter, Pereira, among them. Let them go; I say, the sooner the better, for I have no doubt that the English flag will follow them in due course."

"I hope that they won't," I answered with a nervous laugh; "at any rate, until I have won back my mare." (I had left her in Retief's care as stakeholder, until the match should be shot off.)

For the rest of that two and a half hours' trek my father, looking very dignified and patriotic, declaimed to me loudly about the bad behaviour of the Boers, who hated and traduced missionaries, loathed and abominated British rule and permanent officials, loved slavery and killed Kaffirs whenever they got the chance. I listened to him politely, for it was not wise to cross my parent when he was in that humour. Also, having mixed a great deal with the Dutch, I knew that there was another side to the question, namely, that the missionaries sometimes traduced them (as, in fact, they did), and that British rule, or rather, party government, played strange tricks with the interests of distant dependencies. That permanent officials and im-permanent ones too—such as governors full of a little brief authority—often misrepresented and oppressed them. That Kaffirs, encouraged by the variegated policy of these party governments and their servants, frequently stole their stock; and if they found a chance, murdered them with their women and children, as they had tried to do at Maraisfontein; though there, it is true, they had some provocation. That British virtue had liberated the slaves without paying their owners a fair price for them, and so forth.

But, to tell the truth, it was not of these matters of high policy, which were far enough away from a humble youth like myself, that I was thinking. What appealed to me and made my heart sick was the reflection that if Henri Marais and his friends trekked, Marie Marais must perforce trek with them; and that whereas I, an Englishman, could not be of that adventurous company, Hernando Pereira both could and would.

On the day following our arrival home, what between the fresh air, plenty of good food, for which I found I had an appetite, and liberal doses of Pontac —a generous Cape wine that is a kind of cross between port and Burgundy —I found myself so much better that I was able to hop about the place upon a pair of crutches which Hans improvised for me out of Kaffir sticks. Next morning, my improvement continuing at a rapid rate, I turned my attention seriously to the shooting match, for which I had but five days to prepare.

Now it chanced that some months before a young Englishman of good family —he was named the Honourable Vavasseur Smyth—who had accompanied an official relative to the Cape Colony, came our way in search of sport, of which I was able to show him a good deal of a humble kind. He had brought with him, amongst other weapons, what in those days was considered a very beautiful hair-triggered small-bore rifle fitted with a nipple for percussion caps, then quite a new invention. It was by a maker of the name of J. Purdey, of London, and had cost quite a large sum because of the perfection of its workmanship. When the Honourable V. Smyth—of whom I have never heard since—took his leave of us on his departure for England, being a generous-hearted young fellow, as a souvenir of himself, he kindly presented me with this rifle,* which I still have.

[*—This single-barrelled percussion-cap rifle described by Allan Quatermain, which figures so prominently in the history of this epoch of his life, has been sent to me by Mr. Curtis, and is before me as I write. It was made in the year 1835 by J. Purdey, of 314 1/2, Oxford Street, London, and is a beautiful piece of workmanship of its kind. Without the ramrod, which is now missing, it weighs only 5 lbs. 3 3/4 oz. The barrel is octagonal, and the rifled bore, designed to take a spherical bullet, is 1/2 in. in diameter. The hammer can be set to safety on the half-cock by means of a catch behind it.

Another peculiarity of the weapon, one that I have never seen before, is that by pressing on the back of the trigger the ordinary light pull of the piece is so reduced that the merest touch suffices to fire it, thus rendering it hair-triggered in the fullest sense of the word.

It has two flap-sights marked for 150 and 200 yards, in addition to the fixed sight designed for firing at 100 yards.

On the lock are engraved a stag and a doe, the first lying down and the second standing.

Of its sort and period, it is an extraordinarily well-made and handy gun, finished with horn at the end of what is now called the tongue, and with the stock cut away so as to leave a raised cushion against which the cheek of the shooter rests.

What charge it took I do not know, but I should imagine from 2 1/2 to 3 drachms of powder. It is easy to understand that in the hands of Allan Quatermain this weapon, obsolete as it is to-day, was capable of great things within the limits of its range, and that the faith he put in it at the trial of skill at the Groote Kloof, and afterwards in the fearful ordeal of the shooting of the vultures on the wing, upon the Mount of Slaughter, when the lives of many hung upon his marksmanship, was well justified. This, indeed, is shown by the results in both cases.

In writing of this rifle, Messrs. Purdey informed me that copper percussion caps were experimented with by Colonel Forsyth in 1820, and that their firm sold them in 1824, at a cost of £1 15s. per 1,000, although their use did not become general until some years later.—THE EDITOR.]

That was about six months earlier than the time of which I write, and during those months I had often used this rifle for the shooting of game, such as blesbuck and also of bustards. I found it to be a weapon of the most extraordinary accuracy up to a range of about two hundred yards, though when I rode off in that desperate hurry for Maraisfontein I did not take it with me because it was a single barrel and too small in the bore to load with loopers at a pinch. Still, in challenging Pereira, it was this gun and no other that I determined to use; indeed, had I not owned it I do not think that I should have ventured on the match.

As it happened, Mr. Smyth had left me with the rifle a large supply of specially cast bullets and of the new percussion caps, to say nothing of some very fine imported powder. Therefore, having ammunition in plenty, I set to work to practise. Seating myself upon a chair in a deep kloof near the

station, across which rock pigeons and turtle doves were wont to fly in numbers at a considerable height, I began to fire at them as they flashed over me.

Now, in my age, I may say without fear of being set down a boaster, that I have one gift, that of marksmanship, which, I suppose, I owe to some curious combination of judgment, quickness of eye, and steadiness of hand. I can declare honestly that in my best days I never knew a man who could beat me in shooting at a living object; I say nothing of target work, of which I have little experience. Oddly enough, also, I believe that at this art, although then I lacked the practice which since has come to me in such plenty, I was as good as a youth as I have ever been in later days, and, of course, far better than I am now. This I soon proved upon the present occasion, for seated there in that kloof, after a few trials, I found that I could bring down quite a number of even the swift, straight-flying rock pigeons as they sped over me, and this, be it remembered, not with shot, but with a single bullet, a feat that many would hold to be incredible.

So the days passed, and I practised, every evening finding me a little better at this terribly difficult sport. For always I learned more as to the exact capacities of my rifle and the allowance that must be made according to the speed of the bird, its distance, and the complications of the wind and of the light. During those days, also, I recovered so rapidly that at the end of them I was almost in my normal condition, and could walk well with the aid of a single stick.

At length the eventful Thursday came, and about midday—for I lay in bed late that morning and did not shoot—I drove, or, rather, was driven, in a Cape cart with two horses to the place known as Groote Kloof or Great Gully. Over this gorge the wild geese flighted from their "pans" or feeding grounds on the high lands above, to other pans that lay some miles below, and thence, I suppose, straight out to the sea coast, whence they returned at dawn.

On arriving at the mouth of Groote Kloof about four o'clock in the afternoon, my father and I were astonished to see a great number of Boers assembled there, and among them a certain sprinkling of their younger womankind, who had come on horseback or in carts.

"Good gracious!" I said to my father; "if I had known there was to be such a fuss as this about a shooting match, I don't think I could have faced it."

"Hum," he answered; "I think there is more in the wind than your match. Unless I am much mistaken, it has been made the excuse of a public meeting in a secluded spot, so as to throw the Authorities off the scent."

As a matter of fact, my father was quite right. Before we arrived there that day the majority of those Boers, after full and long discussion, had arranged to shake the dust of the Colony off their feet, and find a home in new lands to the north.

Presently we were among them, and I noticed that, one and all, their faces were anxious and preoccupied. Pieter Retief caught sight of me being helped out of the cart by my father and Hans, whom I had brought to load, and for a moment looked puzzled. Evidently his thoughts were far away. Then he remembered and exclaimed in his jolly voice:

"Why! here is our little Englishman come to shoot off his match like a man of his word. Friend Marais, stop talking about your losses"—this in a warning voice—"and give him good day."

So Marais came, and with him Marie, who blushed and smiled, but to my mind looked more of a grown woman than ever before; one who had left girlhood behind her and found herself face to face with real life and all its troubles. Following her close, very close, as I was quick to notice, was Hernan Pereira. He was even more finely dressed than usual and carried in his hand a beautiful new, single-barrelled rifle, also fitted to take percussion caps, but, as I thought, of a very large bore for the purpose of goose shooting.

"So you have got well again," he said in a genial voice that yet did not ring true. Indeed, it suggested to me that he wished I had done nothing of the sort. "Well, Mynheer Allan, here you find me quite ready to shoot your head off." (He didn't mean that, though I dare say he was.) "I tell you

that the mare is as good as mine, for I have been practising, haven't I, Marie? as the 'aasvogels'" (that is, vultures) "round the stead know to their cost."

"Yes, Cousin Hernan," said Marie, "you have been practising, but so, perhaps, has Allan."

By this time all the company of Boers had collected round us, and began to evince a great interest in the pending contest, as was natural among people who rarely had a gun out of their hands, and thought that fine shooting was the divinest of the arts. However, they were not allowed to stay long, as the Kaffirs said that the geese would begin their afternoon flight within about half an hour. So the spectators were all requested to arrange themselves under the sheer cliff of the kloof, where they could not be seen by the birds coming over them from behind, and there to keep silence. Then Pereira and I—I attended by my loader, but he alone, as he said a man at his elbow would bother him —and with us Retief, the referee, took our stations about a hundred and fifty yards from this face of cliff. Here we screened ourselves as well as we could from the keen sight of the birds behind some tall bushes which grew at this spot.

I seated myself on a camp-stool, which I had brought with me, for my leg was still too weak to allow me to stand long, and waited. Presently Pereira said through Retief that he had a favour to ask, namely, that I would allow him to take the first six shots, as the strain of waiting made him nervous. I answered, "Certainly," although I knew well that the object of the request was that he believed that the outpost geese—"spy-geese" we called them —which would be the first to arrive, would probably come over low down and slow, whereas those that followed, scenting danger, might fly high and fast. This, in fact, proved to be the case, for there is no bird more clever than the misnamed goose.

When we had waited about a quarter of an hour Hans said:

"Hist! Goose comes."

As he spoke, though as yet I could not see the bird, I heard its cry of "Honk, honk" and the swish of its strong wings.

Then it appeared, an old spur-winged gander, probably the king of the flock, flying so low that it only cleared the cliff edge by about twenty feet, and passed over not more than thirty yards up, an easy shot. Pereira fired, and down it came rather slowly, falling a hundred yards or so behind him, while Retief said:

"One for our side."

Pereira loaded again, and just as he had capped his rifle three more geese, also flying low, came over, preceded by a number of ducks, passing straight above us, as they must do owing to the shape of the gap between the land waves of the veld above through which they flighted. Pereira shot, and to my surprise, the second, not the first, bird fell, also a good way behind him.

"Did you shoot at that goose, or the other, nephew?" asked Retief.

"At that one for sure," he answered with a laugh.

"He lies," muttered the Hottentot; "he shot at the first and killed the second."

"Be silent," I answered. "Who would lie about such a thing?"

Again Pereira loaded. By the time that he was ready more geese were approaching, this time in a triangle of seven birds, their leader being at the point of the triangle, which was flying higher than those that had gone before. He fired, and down came not one bird, but two, namely, the captain and the goose to the right of and a little behind it.

"Ah! uncle," exclaimed Pereira, "did you see those birds cross each other as I pulled? That was a lucky one for me, but I won't count the second if the Heer Allan objects."

"No, I did not, nephew," answered Retief, "but doubtless they must have done so, or the same bullet could not have pierced both."

Both Hans and I only looked at each other and laughed. Still we said nothing.

From the spectators under the cliff there came a murmur of congratulation not unmixed with astonishment. Again Pereira loaded, aimed, and loosed at a rather high goose—it may have been about seventy yards in the air. He struck it right enough, for the feathers flew from its breast; but to

my astonishment the bird, after swooping down as though it were going to fall, recovered itself and flew away straight out of sight.

"Tough birds, these geese!" exclaimed Pereira. "They can carry as much lead as a sea-cow."

"Very tough indeed," answered Retief doubtfully. "Never before did I see a bird fly away with an ounce ball through its middle."

"Oh! he will drop dead somewhere," replied Pereira as he rammed his powder down.

Within four minutes more Pereira had fired his two remaining shots, selecting, as he was entitled to do, low and easy young geese that came over him slowly. He killed them both, although the last of them, after falling, waddled along the ground into a tuft of high grass.

Now murmurs of stifled applause broke from the audience, to which Pereira bowed in acknowledgment.

"You will have to shoot very well, Mynheer Allan," said Retief to me, "if you want to beat that. Even if I rule out one of the two birds that fell to a single shot, as I think I shall, Hernan has killed five out of six, which can scarcely be bettered."

"Yes," I answered; "but, mynheer, be so good as to have those geese collected and put upon one side. I don't want them mixed up with mine, if I am lucky enough to bring any down."

He nodded, and some Kaffirs were sent to bring in the geese. Several of these, I noted, were still flapping and had to have their necks twisted, but at the time I did not go to look at them. While this was being done I called to Retief, and begged him to examine the powder and bullets I was about to use.

"What's the good?" he asked, looking at me curiously. "Powder is powder, and a bullet is a bullet."

"None, I dare say. Still, oblige me by looking at them, my uncle."

Then at my bidding Hans took six bullets and placed them in his hand, begging him to return them to us as they were wanted.

"They must be a great deal smaller than Hernan's," said Retief, "who, being stronger, uses a heavier gun."

"Yes," I answered briefly, as Hans put the charge of powder into the rifle, and drove home the wad. Then, taking a bullet from Retief's hand, he rammed that down on to the top of it, capped the gun, and handed it to me.

By now the geese were coming thick, for the flight was at its full. Only, either because some of those that had already passed had sighted the Kaffirs collecting the fallen birds and risen—an example which the others noted from afar and followed—or because in an unknown way warning of their danger had been conveyed to them, they were flying higher and faster than the first arrivals.

"You will have the worst of it, Allan," said Retief. "It should have been shot and shot about."

"Perhaps," I answered, "but that can't be helped now."

Then I rose from my stool, the rifle in my hand. I had not long to wait, for presently over came a wedge of geese nearly a hundred yards up. I aimed at the first fellow, holding about eight yards ahead of him to allow for his pace, and pressed. Next second I heard the clap of the bullet, but alas! it had only struck the outstretched beak, of which a small portion fell to the ground. The bird itself, after wavering a second, resumed its place as leader of the squad and passed away apparently unharmed.

"Baas, baas," whispered Hans as he seized the rifle and began to re-load, "you were too far in front. These big water-birds do not travel as fast as the rock pigeons."

I nodded, wishing to save my breath. Then, quivering with excitement, for if I missed the next shot the match appeared to be lost, presently I took the rifle from his hand.

Scarcely had I done so when a single goose came over quite as high as the others and travelling "as though the black devil had kicked it," as Retief said. This time I allowed the same space to compensate for the object's increased speed and pressed.

Down it came like a stone, falling but a little way behind me with its head knocked off.

"Baas, baas," whispered Hans, "still too far in front. Why aim at the eye when you have the whole body?"

Again I nodded, and at the same time heaved a sigh of relief. At least the match was still alive. Soon a large flight came over, mixed up with mallard and widgeon. I took the right-hand angle bird, so that it could not be supposed I had "browned the lot," as here in England they say of one who fires at a covey and not at a particular partridge. Down he came, shot straight through the breast. Then I knew that I had got my nerve, and felt no more fear.

To cut a long story short, although two of them were extremely difficult and high, one being, I should say, quite a hundred and twenty yards above me, and the other by no means easy, I killed the next three birds one after the other, and I verily believe could have killed a dozen more without a miss, for now I was shooting as I had never shot before.

"Say, nephew Allan," asked Retief curiously in the pause between the fifth and sixth shots, "why do your geese fall so differently to Hernan's?"

"Ask him! don't talk to me," I answered, and next instant brought down number five, the finest shot of the lot.

A sound of wonder and applause came from all the audience, and I saw Marie wave a white handkerchief.

"That's the end," said the referee.

"One minute before you stir," I answered. "I want to shoot at something else that is not in the match, just to see if I can kill two birds with one bullet like the Heer Pereira."

He granted my request with a nod, holding up his hand to prevent the audience from moving, and bidding Pereira, who tried to interrupt, to be silent.

Now, while the match was in progress I had noticed two falcons about the size of the British peregrine wheeling round and round high over the kloof, in which doubtless they bred, apparently quite undisturbed by the shooting. Or, perhaps, they had their eyes upon some of the fallen geese. I took the rifle and waited for a long while, till at last my opportunity came. I saw that the larger hen falcon was about to cross directly over the circle of its mate, there being perhaps a distance of ten yards between them. I aimed; I judged —for a second my mind was a kind of calculating machine— the different arcs and speeds of the birds must be allowed for, and the lowest was ninety yards away. Then, with something like a prayer upon my lips, I pressed while every eye stared upwards.

Down came the lower falcon; a pause of half a second, and down came the higher one also, falling dead upon its dead mate!

Now, even from those Boers, who did not love to see an Englishman excel, there broke a shout of acclamation. Never had they beheld such a shot as this; nor in truth had I.

"Mynheer Retief," I said, "I gave you notice that I intended to try to kill both of them, did I not?"

"You did. Allemachte! you did! But tell me, Allan Quatermain, are your eye and hand quite human?"

"You must ask my father," I answered with a shrug as I sat myself down upon my stool and mopped my brow.

The Boers came up with a rush, Marie flying ahead of them like a swallow, and their stout womenfolk waddling behind, and formed a circle round us, all talking at once. I did not listen to their conversation, till I heard Pereira, who was engaged in some eye-play with Marie, say in a loud voice:

"Yes, it was pretty, very pretty, but all the same, Uncle Retief, I claim the match, as I shot six geese against five."

"Hans," I said, "bring my geese," and they were brought, each with a neat hole through it, and laid down near those that Pereira had shot. "Now," I said to Retief, "examine the wounds in these birds, and then that on the second bird which the Heer Pereira killed when he brought down two at once. I think it will be found that his bullet must have splintered."

Retief went and studied all the birds, taking them up one by one. Then he threw down the last with a curse and cried in a great voice:

"Mynheer Pereira, why do you bring shame on us before these two Englishmen? I say that you have been using loopers, or else bullets that were sawn in quarters and glued or tied with thread. Look, look!" and he pointed to the wounds, of which in one case there were as many as three on a single bird.

"Why not?" answered Pereira coolly. "The bargain was that we were to use bullets, but it was never said that they should not be cut. Doubtless the Heer Allan's were treated in the same way."

"No," I answered, "when I said that I would shoot with a bullet I meant a whole bullet, not one that had been sawn in pieces and fixed together again, so that after it left the muzzle it might spread out like shot. But I do not wish to talk about the matter. It is in the hands of the Heer Pieter Retief, who will give judgment as it pleases him."

Now, much excited argument ensued among the Boers, in the midst of which Marie managed to whisper to me unheard:

"Oh! I am glad, Allan, for whatever they may decide, you won, and the omen is good."

"I don't see what geese have to do with omens, sweetheart," I answered —"that is, since the time of the ancient Romans. Anyhow, I should say that the omens are bad, for there is going to be a row presently."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.