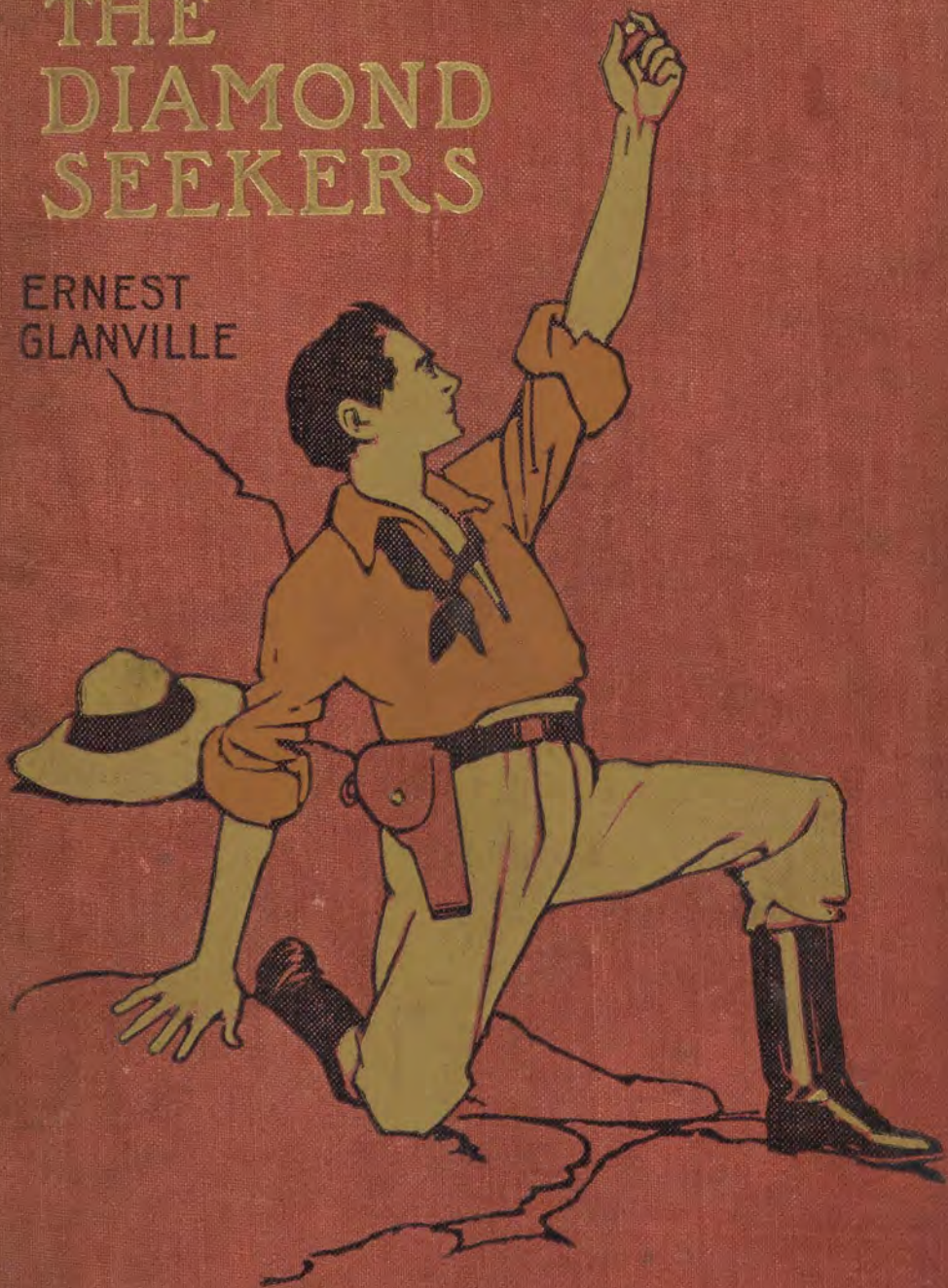


THE DIAMOND SEEKERS

ERNEST
GLANVILLE





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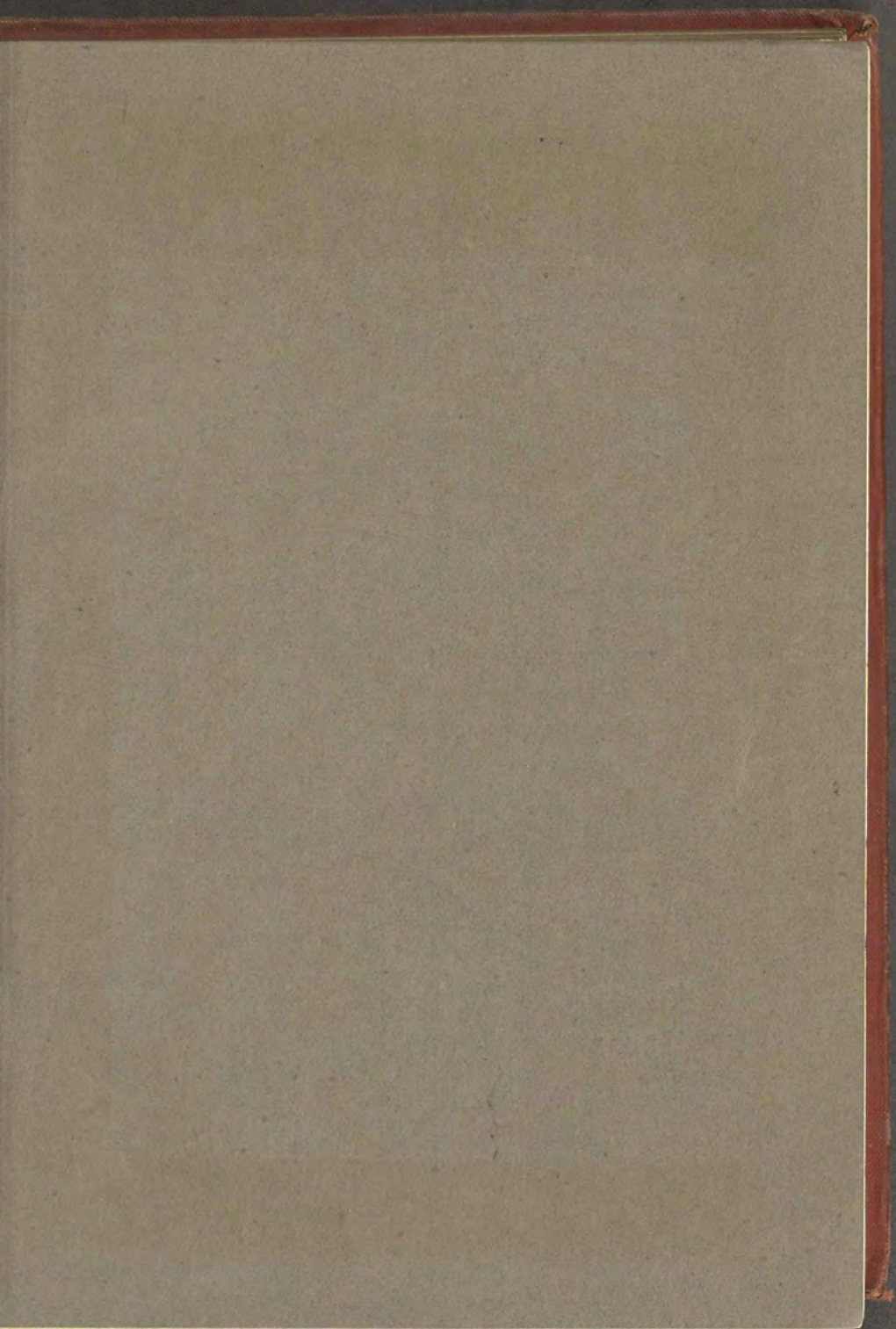
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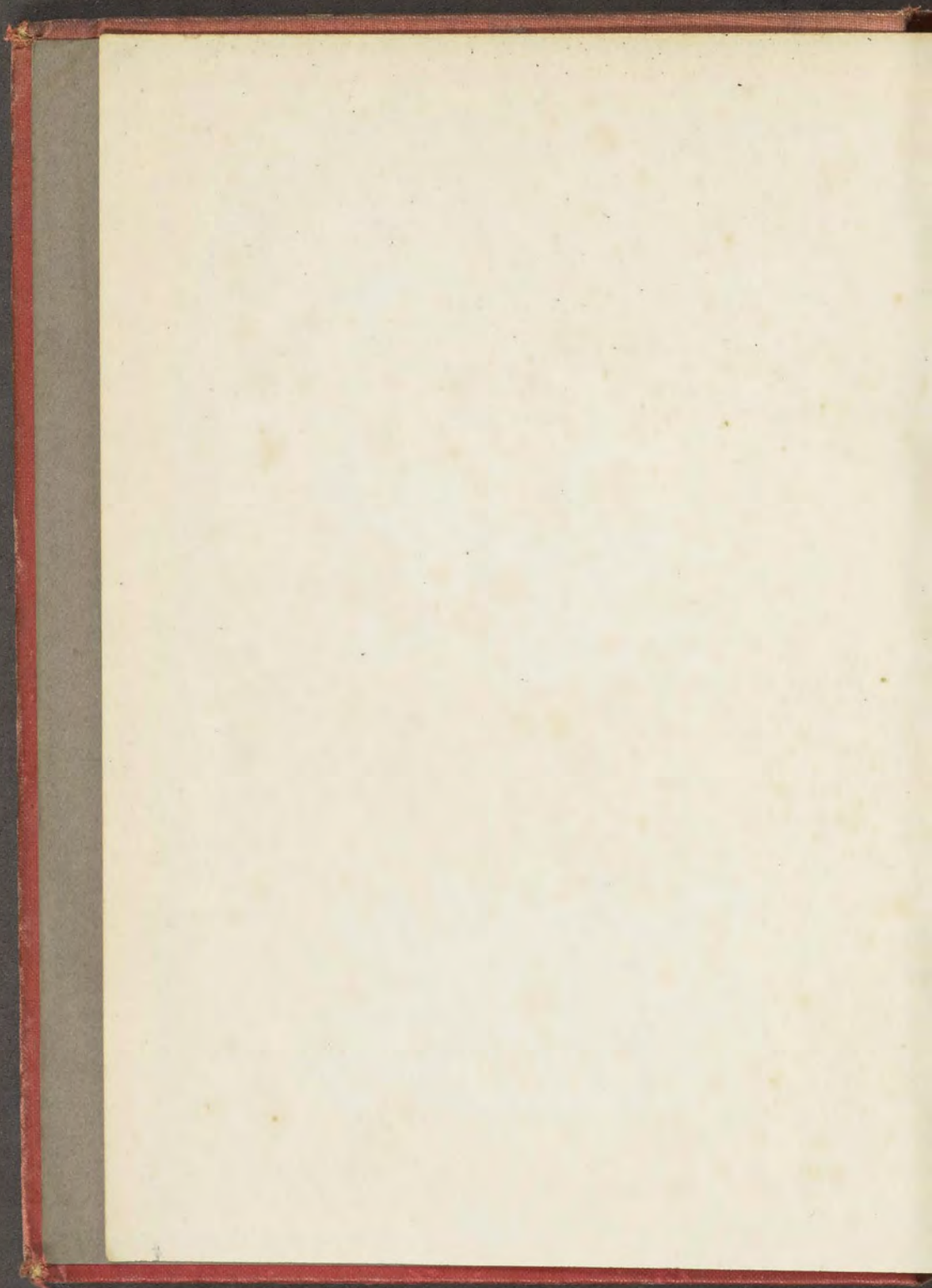
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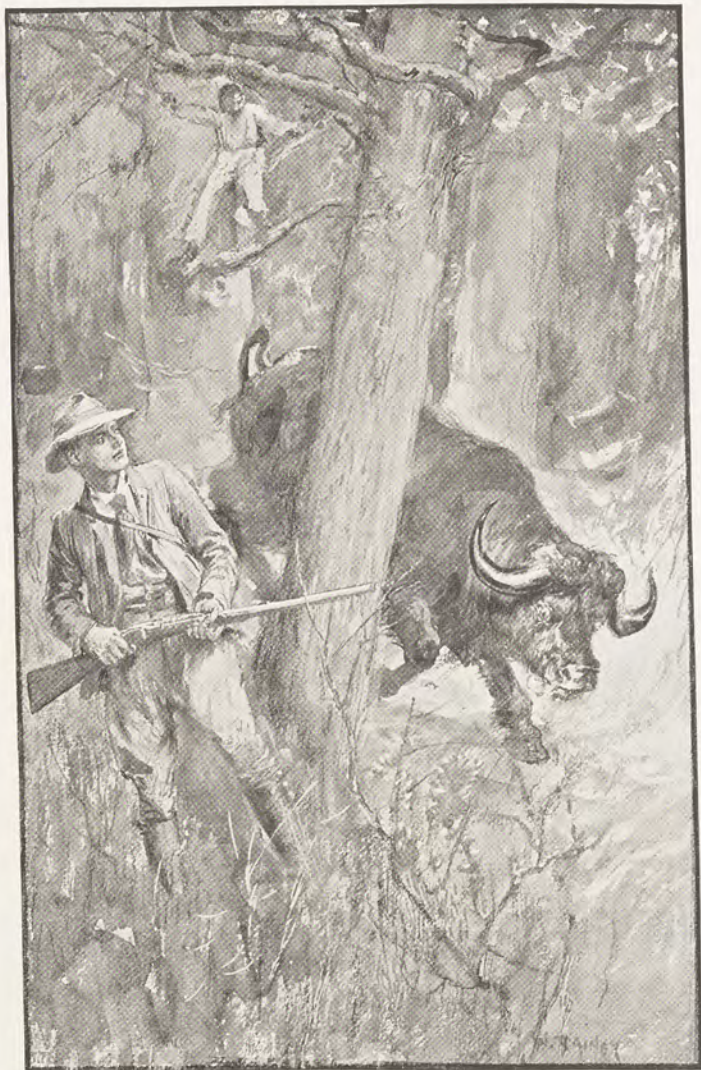
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"MARK SAW SOMETHING DARK COME HURLING ITSELF UPON HIM"

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THE
DIAMOND SEEKERS

*A TALE OF ADVENTURE BY
VELD AND RIVER*

BY

ERNEST GLANVILLE

Author of

“The Fossicker” “Tales from the Veld” “The Kloof Bride”
“Max Thornton” etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM RAINEY, R.I.

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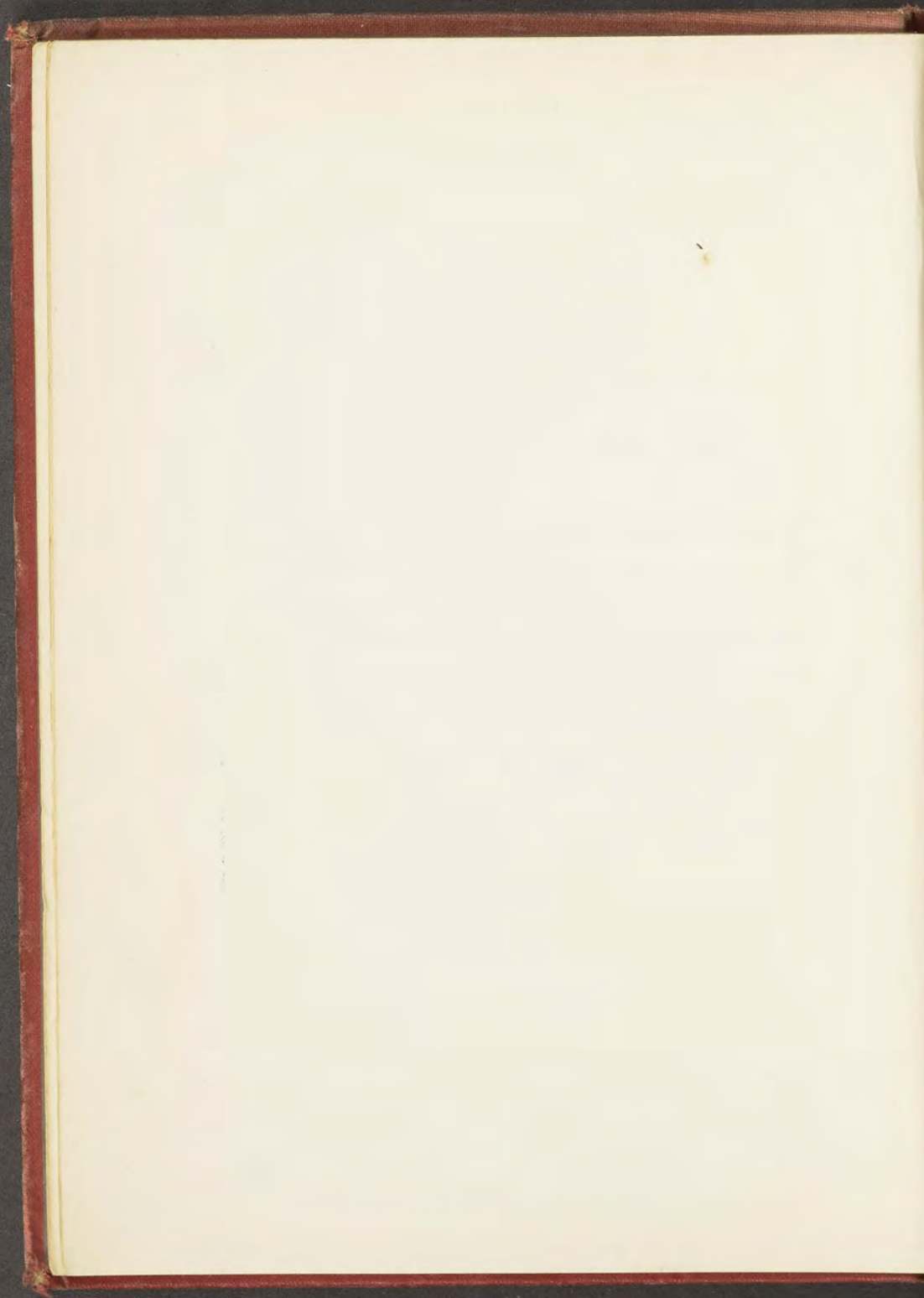
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THE DIAMOND SEEKERS

CHAPTER I

THE NEW "HAND"

Mark Clinton was one of four brothers, and, being the youngest, he had to put up with the fragments which had been left after his father had fitted out the soldier, the lawyer, and the doctor.

The youngest was a fine boy in the eyes of his stern old father, the white-haired General Clinton; and Mark, when at home, really found a greater chum in his father than in any of his brothers. They were discussing Mark's prospects—the school life having been closed with honour, and the boy stood up straight and strong, with clear blue eyes, healthy skin, and a cleft chin like the old man's.

"I am sorry, very sorry, Mark, but I don't see how I can send you to Oxford."

"Cambridge, dad. I may have a chance of my blue there."

"But I have just said I cannot," said the General, a little sharply, because he disliked having to say so.

"All right, dad," said Mark, with a little sigh. "I know you would if you could."

"I might do it yet," said the General, softening at once, "if I got rid of Khyber."

"Got rid of Khyber!"

"Well, you know, boy, that he and I are only fit to be on the shelf, and if I cut him off, and dismissed the coachman and butler——"

"Might move into a smaller house," said Mark, calmly.

"Quite so—quite so. So perhaps after all, my boy, you may win your blue—eh! Then that's settled."

"Settled! Dismiss old Ben, who has been with you ever since I was a kid, sell Khyber, take a small cottage! Thank you, dad, but I would not go up—not if I was certain, dead certain, of being a triple blue."

"Think there is any chance?" asked the General, eagerly. He was proud of the strength of his youngest. The lieutenant sometimes amused him, but more often drove him into a silent paroxysm of smouldering fury by his lofty criticism of the "old school;" the barrister made him feel uncomfortable by superior argumentative gifts; the medical student made him a victim to evil-smelling experiments in chemistry; but the youngest was still young enough to know how young he was, and did not venture to instruct his parent.

"About as much chance as of my heading the list as Senior Wrangler. I should like to go to the 'Varsity—I don't know any chap who would not—but if you are to suffer inconvenience by sending me up, then I should rather not. But if I cannot go to the 'Varsity, I should like very much to go to the Colonies."

"I have met many boys in the Colonies who were too lazy or incompetent to work in England. They became

The New "Hand" 9

merely 'remittance men,' living on the pittance they wrung out of their friends at home."

"I should want no remittance, father. If you would send me out with enough to keep me for a month, I should ask no more."

"'The Colonies' is a large term, Mark," said the General, with a slight smile. "Can you give me more particulars? or has the idea just occurred to you?"

"A chap from my form went out to the Cape last year, and he has written me about his life. He took a place on a farm, and did so well that the farmer has agreed to pay him in cattle, so that at the end of his term he will have a herd of his own to start with. I thought about going out when I received his first letter."

"Do you know anything of farming, Mark?"

"I think I should pick up a knowledge in three years, and I should not expect to be paid as he was."

"Well, Mark, I will think it over," said the General, pacing up and down the room. "The thing is not so simple as it seems to you. Farming in the Colonies is laborious work, with all the difficulties of farming here added to the drawbacks from droughts and small markets. Moreover, there is the risk of joining a bad farmer, who would give you a hut to sleep in, provide you with poor food, and treat you merely as a farm hand. I will make inquiries and think it over. Should I be convinced that the life holds out fair prospects, I will not stand in your way. In the mean time, what do you propose to do with your holidays—play cricket?"

Mark hesitated. There were several interesting matches on the card in which he had been invited to play; but at

the same time, he recognized that it would not be the thing to waste his time.

"If you don't mind, sir, I will write to my friend Ralph Digby's father, and ask him to let me get to work on the farm. He is bailiff to a large estate. I may pick up something useful. It was Ralph's suggestion."

"A good idea, Mark. Write at once, and I will add a word to your letter."

"Thank you, dad."

Before the end of the week Mark found himself in the presence of Mr. Digby, a tall, sharp-faced man, with a very abrupt manner. After five minutes Mark thought him the most disagreeable man he had ever met. There was absolutely nothing of the friendliness which a man had the right to expect from the father of his school chum, and Mark thought it distinctly rough luck that his friend Ralph should have such a grim parent.

"You're not a visitor," said Mr. Digby. "You're not a farm hand. I hope you're not a passenger."

"A passenger? I don't quite understand."

"Otherwise a dead-head. A person who puts his hands in his pockets, and, without knowing anything of the matter himself, offers to instruct those who do know."

"I wish to work, Mr. Digby," said Mark, "and the more you give me the better it will please me."

"A farmer has to go to the root of the business; and you may begin by hoeing turnips."

"Is that a joke?" asked Mark, with a grin that challenged a friendly smile in return.

"Ask me this evening whether you think so. It is now three o'clock. You will find a hoe in the shed, and the turnips beyond that ledge. Begin at the first row, and

cut out the weeds, then work down the second row, and so on. We dine at 7.30 sharp."

He turned away, and as he went a broad smile spread over his smooth jaws, like eddies in a pond.

Mark had not anticipated the indignity of hoeing turnips. Nevertheless, he marched into the shed, picked up a weapon that he thought might be a hoe, and entered upon the field of his labours with his chin very much in the air. He cast a disdainful eye over the humble crop, which extended to a far-off hedge, and aimed a terrific blow at a yellow-flowering weed, mighty enough to decapitate an infidel Turk. Halfway up the row he shed his coat, a little later his waistcoat, and when he turned, his sleeves were rolled up, and he was without a hat. At the end of the second row he had a distressing pain in his back, and, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his hand, he left behind a beautiful streak of dirt as a visible sign of labour. He looked at the field with more respect now. On entering the fourth row he was longing for the sun to set, and when he reached the bottom, sodden with perspiration, grimy with dust, and racked as with rheumatism, he loathed his task with a bitter loathing too deep for words.

"Humph!"

He heard somewhere a snort, and looked first into the air, then at the fences, and then slowly turned his head. Mr. Digby, looking very cool, was glancing at the completed rows.

"Looks as if a steam-plough had been at work," he said reflectively. "I wished the rows hoed, not dug up."

Mark straightened up by degrees, and wiped the moisture out of his eyes.

"I believe I have cut a good many turnips," he said.

"Oh, you'll be better to-morrow. Give me the hoe. There is no need to use your strength, but make a light chop—so, and draw the weed back—so." And Mr. Digby neatly and cleanly cut the weeds out. "Finish this row, and then come in."

"You were a long time over that last row," said Mr. Digby, later, when the dinner-bell summoned the tired amateur "hand" from his work.

"I was raking the weeds together," answered Mark, pleasantly. He hoped that after dinner he would be allowed his liberty to roam about, visit the stables, and walk down to the rabbit-warren to watch the "cotton tails" at play; but there was another trial in store.

"I want you," said Mr. Digby, "to help the stable-boy bed down the horses. We are short-handed to-day."

"I am not a stable-boy," said Mark, rather warmly.

Mr. Digby looked at his cigar-ash. "You will have to bed your horse down in the Cape; you will have to draw the water, cut the wood, clean the stables, feed the pigs, wash the sheep, and put your pride in your pocket. Do you know how to bed a horse down?"

"Perhaps I had better learn," said Mark, with a groan.

"Come along," said his mentor; and very soon Mark was struggling with a pitchfork in a vain attempt to follow the nimble methods of the stable-boy, who caught the straw up and laid it out, coaxed it, and patted it into shape with the sureness of a chambermaid about a feather-bed. The hunters cocked their ears at Mark, snorted at him, and switched their tails, while the fine dust from the straw sifted into his eyes and nostrils.

"Keep the pot a-bilin', master," said the boy.

"Eh! what's that?"

"Why, just blow through your teeth, 's if you were a blooming kettle on the boil. Keeps the fluff off your breather, and amoooses the 'osses."

Mr. Digby paused at the door as if to light his pipe, but really to see how his "new hand" would take this advice from the presuming stable-boy. He would not have been in the least surprised if young Clinton had threatened to punch the boy's head if he did not mind his business; but when Mark began to blow cheerfully through his teeth, he nodded his head.

"That's it! always let the steam off. I think I'll take a hand myself;" and to the open-mouthed amazement of the real stable-boy, his master reached for a pitchfork, and set to bed-making in a workmanlike manner.

The stable-boy put his diminutive shoulders against the quarters of a hunter, as near up as he could get, and proceeded to heave the good-natured thoroughbred with a hoarse command to "Coom over, there!" Then he whispered across to Mark, with a jerk of his thumb at his master—

"He's a reg'lar oner. I seed him down a poacher with his left; and he can shoe a 'oss like the smith at the cross-roads. I dunno wot he can't do. Coom over, will you, rawbones?" and the stable-boy's hissing whistle rose shrilly.

Mark shot a look of increased respect at Mr. Digby, and went on with his work.

"A regular oner," muttered the boy again. "Never see his trace slack—never; puts his shoulder into it—he does. So he does. I dunno wot he can't do. And

when he does a thing it seems just right he should do it. That's the queer thing."

Then the hissing went on, and Mark did a little thinking as he worked the straw. There were twenty stalls to bed down, and out of that number of horses there were some who showed a disposition to lash out, and he had to tackle one of these. It tucked its tail in, flattened its ears back, and gave him a backward glance, showing the white of its eyes.

"Go to his head," said Mr. Digby.

Mark was not much used to horses, but he thought that confidence would win their respect, and he tackled the fidgety chestnut like an old hand.

"That's the way," said Mr. Digby. "Now bring him out and turn him into the loose box. If the horse had lashed out, he might have lamed himself against the prongs of your fork."

"Or he might have lamed me," thought Mark, as he led the horse out.

When the work was finished he was dog-tired, and as he flung himself into bed a little later he did so with the anticipation of a long sleep right up to breakfast-time.

"I forgot to say," said Mr. Digby, looking in at the door, "that the working day begins at six. You will hear the bell. Go on with the turnips."

Mark turned over, and about a minute later, as it seemed to him, he was awakened by the outrageous clamour of a bell. He thought it was fire, and ran to the window in a state of half-pleasurable excitement, but the light he saw was the glorious flush of morning. The stable-boy, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up and his braces hanging in loops, was carrying two buckets of water.

Through a gate he could see a maid scattering corn for a flock of fowls and chickens, and over a rise he saw a procession of farm labourers walking heavily, the smoke curling from their pipes in little puffs, easily discernible in the clear air. A carter with his whip over his shoulder strode noisily across the yard; and he heard the voice of Mr. Digby giving directions. He looked back at his bed, yawned, hugged himself, took another long look at the picture of awakened life, then plunged his head into a basin of cold water. He flung his clothes on in record time, and was out as the quarter-past chimed.

"You're late," said Mr. Digby, who carried a towel over his shoulder.

"Awfully sorry," said Mark; "but I'm ready for work."

"I'm sure of it," said Mr. Digby, with the first friendly smile. "That's why I will let you off. Get your towel, and we'll have a plunge in the river. That will suit you."

"Rather," said Mark, as he flew upstairs, and down again with his towel, to find Mr. Digby with a cup of coffee in one hand and a slice of bread-and-butter—home-made—in the other.

"There's your share on the window-sill. Always take a bite in the early morning, and never smoke before breakfast."

"I don't smoke—at least, not much—only a cigarette," said Mark, as he sipped his coffee.

"If you want to smoke—and there are very few Colonials who do not—smoke a pipe. It's more companionable, and better in every way."

They had a grand swim in a swift current with a gravel bottom, and when it was over, and Mark was ready

to run a race or shout for the joy of living, Mr. Digby went along the bank to a pollard willow, where he stood to look at the ground.

"See anything suspicious there?"

"No, sir," said Mark, wondering.

"That dock leaf has been flattened down, and there's a smear of wet mud on that root. Some one knelt down there, placed his left hand on the root, and plunged his right hand and arm into the water."

"And suppose he did?"

"He did; but the question is—Did he tickle the trout?"

"'Tickle the trout!' You are taking a rise out of me, sir."

Mr. Digby dropped a pebble in, and a dark form flashed out from the roots.

"Good! the beggar didn't catch him, then. Never heard of a poacher tickling for trout, eh? Well, the man who went down on his knee there has practised the art evidently. A trout likes to be tickled, and the poacher knows it. When he marks a leviathan down, he either yanks him out by getting a loop round his tail, or he gently hooks a finger under him, and softly tickles the belly until he has his whole hand beneath, when with a heave he hoists the old chap high and dry. We will call on the keeper in passing, and put him on his guard."

They struck off toward a thick wood, and all the way Mr. Digby had a watchful eye for everything—for the cattle in the pasture, the sheep, the drains, the fences. Mark was impatient at the frequent delays, as he wished to get to the keeper's lodge—that centre of a mysterious woodcraft.

"You'll know some day," said Mr. Digby, "that a

farmer can never be too watchful. There's a wether over there with a torn flank: barbed wire did it—wants seeing to. One of the drains is choked; that last hedge requires staking; and the plank bridge over the wide ditch should be renewed. Always keep your eyes open, lest your enemies get ahead."

"I am not a fellow who makes enemies," said Mark, with a frank laugh.

Mr. Digby laughed. "That's good. I'm not talking about the enemies you mean, but of the army of weeds that march into the land in the night; of the countless host of insect life that overruns your plants and swarms over your live stock; of the rust that attacks your wheat; of the poverty that saps your land; of the dry rot that weakens your fencing. See that wisp of smoke coiling up through the dark foliage of the pines? That comes from the keeper's lodge."

They struck into the silence of the woods by a narrow path which wound in and out among the tall trees, and, as if by instinct, they dropped into silence. A pheasant slunk across a sun-spotted glade with outstretched neck; a rabbit made a bound, then stood with pointed ears, while it struck an alarm on the ground with a vigorous hind leg. In a moment they appeared to Mark to be in another world—a world of soft sounds, of shadows, of new sensations. He felt that life would hold no greater joy than a camp within twenty leagues of forest, with right to fish and shoot; and then he stepped out of the shadows into the presence of a flock of peaceful barn-door fowls, who called him out of his dreams with their noisy civilized cackle. They stopped at the shed door, tagged out with skins of moles, a stoat or two, and the wing of a crow.

"There are no owls slain here; they have full right of venerie, together with the sparrow-hawk. An owl will levy toll on the young game, and so will the hawk; but the rats and such vermin do more damage in the coverts and fields, and between them and the owls and hawks there is a blood-feud. So we know our friends, and set no pole-traps. Good morning, Fanshawe."

This to a man in cords, who had a way of looking about him as he spoke, and who would pause to follow the flight of a bird or listen to some sound.

"Morning, Mr. Digby. You've been up by the pollards, I see." His eyes rested on Mark's boots, then went swiftly to his face.

"And you, Fanshawe, have been up all night. You see, I can read the meaning of those burrs on your clothes. Anything wrong with the coverts?"

The keeper looked at Mark, and then glanced after a wood-pigeon that flashed overhead.

"He's been here again, Mr. Digby."

"Not the fellow who gave us such trouble last summer?"

"The very same. I took the measure of his footprint in the far drive, and it's the same as the measure I took last year, and the boot is the size of this young gentleman's foot, I should say."

"And you watched for him last night without success, if he is the same?"

"I got his foot measure," said Fanshawe, slowly, "and I got his height, and by the same token his cap. See, here 'tis;" and he drew forth from a bulging pocket a soft cap of grey tweed, which he handed, not to Mr. Digby, but to Clinton.

"It's my cap," said Mark. "I missed it this morning."

The keeper plucked a piece of grass, and chewed the end of it reflectively.

"Your cap?" said Mr. Digby.

"Ay, sir, and his boots. D'ye mind lifting your foot?"

Mark raised a boot, and the keeper deliberately measured it.

"Exactly," he muttered; then ran a tape from the crown of Mark's head to his waist, and from the waist to the heels. "Same height also."

"You don't think, Fanshawe," said Mr. Digby, laughing, "that Mr. Clinton is the poacher?"

"What I do say, sir, is that the poacher wore the young gentleman's cap and boots—rubber-soled boots they were."

Mr. Digby turned the cap over, and Mark grew hot with indignation.

"If you mean——" he began fiercely.

"I don't mean it," said the keeper. "Bless your heart, if you tried to enter my preserves last night, I would have had you at once. That is not the point. What bothers me is how he came to get your things, or how he came to be up at the house at all. Ever walk in your sleep?"

"I sleep too well."

"Well, now, that's a pity—a great pity. What do you think, Mr. Digby?"

"You've got something in your mind, Fanshawe; out with it."

The keeper glanced around. "Well, sir, if the young gentleman walked in his sleep, the thing's explained, and no more is said. That's plain."

"I don't think so."

"But," said Mark, with a puzzled laugh, "I did not walk in my sleep."

"If you would not mind, Mr. Clinton, I would like to put it about that you took a walk last night. That is my trap, and I want you to help me with the lure."

"I would help gladly," said Mark, who had visions of a shindy with poachers; "but how?"

"As soon as I picked up your cap I saw a way."

"How could you possibly know it was my cap? I have not seen you before."

The keeper smiled. "But I have seen you," he said. "When I picked up your cap I knew that the fellow had been watching you. Well, when he learns that we think you were in the coverts, and not he, it will tickle him so that he will try and get another look at you. I want you to get a look at him."

"I don't like spying on a chap; why not set some one to watch me in the hope of seeing him?"

"I might set some one to watch you who is the very man we want."

"You still think he is one of the farm hands, then?" asked Mr. Digby.

"I do," said the keeper, firmly.

"I don't think you need refuse this work, Clinton. I have often myself watched for poachers; and I tell you, it would be a feather in your cap to detect the rascal."

"I should be only too glad; but what am I to do?"

"Keep your eyes open without seeming to do so," said the keeper. "Look out for some one about your own size."

CHAPTER II

THE POACHER

They went back to a good farm breakfast, and, when the meal was finished, Mr. Digby told Mark to take his lunch with him, and go to a far corner of the estate, promising to overtake him at the spot, with directions as to the task. With a well-stocked basket on his arm, and a bill-hook in his hand, Mark set off briskly. The bill-hook afforded him much satisfaction; it was a superior implement altogether than the hoe, and it held out a project of destructive tactics against tree or brambles. When he reached his destination, the field of his operations too was decidedly attractive. Beyond Mr. Digby, who came into view over a ridge, there was not a soul in sight, and nothing much else to view but trees and brushwood—old oaks with a network of sunshine flickering beneath their spreading branches; on one side a green bay of sward, and on the other a matted thicket of young wood.

“How do you like this, Clinton?”

“It’s splendid. I hope you mean me to work here, sir.”

“Just here. You see that opening in the covert?”

“I was wondering what use a path was there, as it seems to lead nowhere.”

“That is a drive. That is where some of the best

guns are stationed during the great shoot. It runs straight for a good half-mile, and it is there I wish you to work."

Mark took a firm hold of his weapon.

"You see, it is overgrown, and I want the loose ends cleared. I don't expect you to do the job all at once, you know. Go about it leisurely but thoroughly, piling the rubbish as you go in the clearing behind. Don't slash about, just hitch the hook over the branch or bramble and pull it to you with a quick downward jerk that is half sawing. Give it to me—so."

"I see, sir."

"Now I will leave you for the day. You won't feel lonely?"

Mark laughed as he pulled off his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"And Clinton," Mr. Digby stooped down to look to the stirrup-buckle, "remember what the keeper said, for we suffered heavily last season from this poacher, who must be a keen sort to get the better of Fanshawe."

"I am to be used as a lure, then?" asked Mark, doubtfully.

"My dear boy, if ever you farm in South Africa you will find that you must set your wits against men who won't work themselves, but who profit from your own industry. I don't suppose for a moment that you can catch this fellow, but if he should come, and he appears to have marked you down as a victim, you may pick up a wrinkle or two. In any case the exercise will do you good, and you cannot do much harm."

Mr. Digby rode off at a gallop, and Mark settled down to work, folded his coat up neatly, placed it with the basket at the foot of the tree in the shade, and then

inspected the overgrown drive with a critical eye. It was very quiet, with only a faint whispering of the leaves, and not a sign of life. He struck a blow at a sapling, and at the crash a ball of white cotton whisked round a bush. He tiptoed a few steps sideways, and saw the little brown form of a rabbit standing alert, with cocked ears, while beyond there was a fleeting vision of a pheasant with outstretched neck and drooping tail. Mark looked about for a stone, could not find one, sighed, and went back to finish off the sapling, which he ended by mutilating so badly that he was compelled to round off the wounds with his pocket-knife. But he had not played hockey without learning the trick of wrist, "hook" and thrust, and very soon for a town boy he was clearing a track through the overgrowth without more annoyance than a switch across the face from an overgrown sapling, and a few scratches at regular intervals from brambles. It was not bad work, and he tried to do it well, pausing frequently to glance about him, not for signs of the poacher, but in search of fur and feathers. Man belongs to the silent and waiting class of hunters. It is hard to say so, but there is much of the snake in his methods. The natural hunter, who has to depend on a frail weapon, is stealthy and slow in his approach, and so is the sportsman who stalks a red deer with the best rifle that money can buy.

On Mark, between his strokes, there fell, as if by instinct, the cloak of absolute stillness. Like certain insects in tropical Africa, which adapt themselves to the shape and colour of the leaves and bark on which they live, he backed against the lichen-covered trunk of an old tree, and watched, moving only his eyes. He was surprised at the number and variety of creatures he saw—not in groups, of course,

but one here, one there, a hedgehog nosing among the dead leaves: a couple of squirrels playing awkwardly among the bracken; a buck rabbit sounding the alarm with an emphatic stamp of his hind foot; the round lustrous jewel-like eye of a pheasant shining out of a tuft, with no other part of its body visible; and the constant fitting of birds. He longed for the bill-hook to turn into a rifle, for the scene to shift to some wild backwoods, with his lone tent pitched on the banks of some wood-enclosed lake, where the elk and the bear would drink, and the fish would run to four-pounders at least. From these dreams he was aroused by the discovery that he was hungry, and he made his way back to the little glade where he had left his coat and basket, very well pleased with himself. He felt that he had earned his salt, and would not have changed places with his brother the barrister. Of course, there were other joys not to be despised. He took "block" with his bill-hook, watched the imaginary run of the demon bowler who was his particular antipathy, met the imaginary ball at its pitch, and drove it clean out of bounds. With the phantom cry of "Oh, good stroke, sir!" he swaggered to the giant oak, and stared hard at the ground, up the tree, and all about.

His coat was gone, the basket was opened, and a colony of black ants were busily removing the crumbs and fragments that remained of his luncheon.

A shabby trick; a low, ungentlemanly, mean, sneakish trick! Mark had never been so angry. If the thief had been as big as the tree, he felt he could have thrashed him until he cried for mercy. It was not the coat he minded, but the brown loaf and golden butter, the half of a chicken,

and the three-cornered apple-pasty. Of this feast there was nothing left but the snow-white napkin. He picked this up, and out rolled a despicable turnip. The insult was more than he could bear. He took it up and hurled it against the tree with savage vigour, breaking it into fragments, but the disgusting part of the business was that after he had been sitting gloomily silent, his sordid appetite drove him to the indignity of gathering up these many fragments, and of eating them one by one, while he glared about him all the time with frowning brows.

"If only I could get one blow!" and Mark drove his right fist into the air. Then he went down to a little bubbling spring for a drink, dipping his mouth in, and taking a big draught to stay the miserable clamour of his abject stomach. As he rose on his hands, the print of a knee stared him in the face, exactly the same that had been pointed out to him early in the morning, near the pollards where the old trout harboured. There was a small break in the impression of the lines of the cords, as if a patch had been let in on the knee, and Mark had noticed this. He had no difficulty, on the soft ground, in finding the imprint of a foot, which, on comparison, matched his own. It seemed clear that the spring had been visited by the poacher, but the question was whether the poacher was the rascal who ate the lunch and stole the coat? Mark felt convinced that it was the same double-dyed rogue, but as he did not know how to set about proving this, he went back to his work in the drive.

The shadows had shifted round. The splashes of sunlight, and the bright lace-work on the leaves, that had been on his right, were now on his left; and so, instead of watching the wood on the right in the pauses

of his work, his attention was given to the other side, not that he took the same delight in it that he did before. He felt that the poacher was having a joke at his expense, and his ideas of poaching had undergone a change. So when he stood back in the shadow for a look around it was in the hope of seeing, not a rabbit, but a skulking human ferret. Two or three times he fancied he saw a face peeping at him from behind a tree, but once it proved to be a patch of fungus, and the second time the flicker of sunlight on a smooth sapling; yet the idea grew upon him, so that before long he had an uneasy feeling of being watched. Many a man in a wood has had the same feeling, and there is nothing that tries the nerve of even the staunchest, more than the suspicion that he is being shadowed. The fixed stare and stealthy approach of the tiger is more nerve-shaking than his roar. It is a part of his strategy to wear out the courage of his victim by keeping him on tenter-hooks, by making him, whether man or deer, imagine that the sudden spring may come from any quarter, and the man who would meet a charge coolly if he could see it coming, grows shaky when all he does know is that he is being watched without himself being able to see his enemy.

Mark, of course, was in no such dilemma. There was no royal tiger crouching ahead in the bracken, or on his right in a thicket of hazels, or behind him among the brambles, only some two-legged thief of the woods about his own size; and instead of glancing about him repeatedly as he had been doing, he went vigorously to work, and as he worked he whistled.

Apparently he had forgotten his troubles. He was a careless young woodman, just thinking of nothing at all, and



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"HE MADE A PLUNGE INTO THE BRACKEN"



whistling all out of harmony. A blackbird gently put him right with a full round note uttered close at hand. Mark tootled on in a mournful key, and this time a thrush gave out a merry ripple of music by way of giving him a lead; and then, as he paid no heed, the blackbird and the thrush held an animated conversation, both in exactly the same spot. Mark glanced under his arm, but could see neither one nor the other. The sound came not from the trees, but from the ground, and he could not whistle at all because of a sudden throat huskiness. He coughed, and a squirrel chattered at him. He did not even look up, but began to sing, in a voice that was uncertain as to whether it was bass, tenor, or alto, and a cock pheasant crowed an indignant crow, from the place where the squirrel had been. Evidently, the bracken was full of creatures met for a concert. Mark went on calmly churning out harsh sounds, under the mistaken idea that he was singing, and the complaints from the bracken increased. A hedgehog joined the unseen orchestra, then a rook, and such an extraordinary clatter arose, that at last Mark stopped in apparent bewilderment. He stared into the bracken, and the noise ceased; then he looked up into the trees, and a smothered "chuck-chuck!" came softly to his ears. Finally, after a prolonged stare into the sky and all around, he resumed his work and his whistling. The blackbird started, and Mark whistled louder; then the thrush broke out into a really splendid burst, and while it was in the intricacies of a difficult bar, Mark threw his bill-hook down, made a plunge into the bracken, and flung himself forward.

He had caught something. A moment he lay outstretched, then he was heaved up, went over, rolled up on top again—then under again—leaving a space of crushed

bracken. Back into this went a mass of writhing legs and arms attached to one body with two heads which emitted strange grunts. It rolled this way, butted against a tree, writhed and twisted and strained, with toes dug into the ground, and fingers that gripped and loosened and gripped again.

"I've had 'nuff!" with a pant. "'Nuff! you're chokin' me."

Mark, who was on top, heaved himself to a sitting position, with the small of some one's back as a seat, and at the same time let go his grip.

"Get off!" came in a weak smothered voice.

Mark got on to his knees, and for his trustfulness was fired on to his head, while his opponent struggled to his feet; but his last effort had taken away all the strength from him, and he blundered in the wrong direction. Mark made a wild spasmodic sweep with his right leg, and brought the tottering figure down with a crash. Mark threw out a hand, seized hold of an arm, then rolled himself once more on the top.

"Give in?" he gasped.

No answer.

"All right. I'll make you!" and once more he got astride of his foe. Still the other lay motionless, with inert arms and fingers feebly bent. "Halloa! you, I say!" Mark turned the form over, and saw that the eyes were closed and the lips blue.

"I say, come! are you shamming?" And as he spoke he unknotted a loose blue kerchief that was tied round the collarless neck, then lifted the nerveless body into a sitting position, worked it on to his back, struggled slowly to his feet, and went staggering off to the water.

It was a hard fight, but he got there somehow, and with his hands hollowed scooped water into the still, death-like face. The water trickled into the nostrils, the face worked in a hideous grimace, which ended in a terrific sneeze.

"Halloa!"

"No, you don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't humbug me any more. Why did you sham unconsciousness."

"Did you carry me down here, young 'un?"

Mark maintained a disgusted silence, and glared at his foe, who looked the most singular object, with his clothes torn, his face streaked with mud, and strips of black hair plastered down over his forehead.

"I say," he said with a little twitch of his lips, "my collar-bone's gone."

"Dislocated," said Mark, going down on his knees at once, and feeling the other's shoulder gently. "By Jove! I'm awfully sorry. I should have left you up there and gone for the water, instead of carrying you, with the weight of your body on your arms. What's to be done?"

"That's easy. You let me be, and I'll cut my stick."

"Cut your stick?"

"Sling my hook; make tracks; hamba gashla."

"Hamba what?"

"That's Kaffir for 'running carefully.' So if you don't mind I'll say 'so long,' and clear out."

"You keep quiet. I am sorry your shoulder is bad, but after all, you've got yourself to blame for it. Can you walk?"

"There's a short cut to the keeper's place through the woods. I'll show you the way; but in my country——"

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"Well?"

"In my country a chap wouldn't split on another chap, especially when one chap was hurt."

"I am not a poacher," said Mark.

"So? Thought I seed you chuck a stone at a rabbit. 'Spose you'd hit him, you'd 'a killed him. What then?"

"I don't wish to argue. Are you ready?"

"You live well, you sleep warm, maybe you've got friends, and you try to kill a rabbit. I sleep anywhere, got no friends, and you want to give me up to the keeper. Why, a Kaffir wouldn't do that."

"You stole my coat and my dinner," said Mark, quietly.

"I just borrowed them," said the other, with a sly glance. "I tell you what, you come into the wood, and I'll show you all the traps I set. Then you can show 'em to old Leggings. An' I'll teach you how to set a 'wep,' only it won't be any good, as there are no bucks here same as in my country; but I can teach you how to give the pheasant call."

"What is your country?"

"Over yonder in the Cape."

"How did you come here, then?"

"In a ship, I 'spect."

"And why don't you go back?"

"Do you s'pose I wouldn't if I could? My uncle brought me over, and put me in a school. Well, I couldn't 'stand it—see? and I took to the woods."

"Why don't you work your way out in a ship?"

"Tried to three times, and they set me ashore for being sick and staying sick. Then I hid away twice. The first time they gave me a hiding with a rope, and put me

ashore at Plymouth; next time the ship were wrecked in the Channel, and I broke my shoulder in the same place. That's all."

"Couldn't you earn your passage money?"

"Been earnin' it catchin' rabbits and pheasants."

"But," said Mark, surprised into a laugh, "that's not work; it's poaching."

"It's my work," said the other. "I was brought up on thick milk out of a calabash with Kaffir kids, and I went barefooted in an' out the bush till my uncle put boots on me and a collar."

"Where is your uncle?"

"He lives somewhere in London. Well, are you goin' to play fair?"

"Look here! What's your name?"

"My name don't matter. What is it?"

"I've been thinking. I am going to the Cape to learn farming, and I thought we might get your uncle to send you out with me, if he can afford it."

"Afford it! Him! Why, he doesn't know how rich he is."

"Then ask him."

"I did arst him once," said the boy, with a dark look. "That was the first time I ran away. There was a master who used to talk at me—just talk at me at meals. He would make the chaps laugh; but I up and went straight back to my uncle—walked every yard, and without arsting a soul. I tell you it was good trackin'. Well, my uncle said nothin', and he set down and wrote a letter to the head boss, and sent me back. The head master was all right, he talked to me 's if I were a man, but that other one I told you about he fired off some

smart things—sort o' showed me off to the boys 's if I were a wild animal."

"And——"

"Well, they shut me up in a room next the roof, and I climbed down the water-spout. That's so."

"Would you like to get back very much?"

"Would I?" said the other with a grimace. Then he turned his head and secretively brushed his torn sleeve across his eyes. "Don't you think I'm cryin' because I'm afraid to go," he suddenly burst out. "Look at my feet." With a sort of feverish excitement he tore off his shoes, and disclosed a foot swollen and lacerated. "Been trampin' an' trampin' till my boots came off, and I were that hungry I were lookin' for a turnip yesterday when I see you playin' with a hoe. If it hadn't 'a been that I were playin' the fool, you'd never 'a caught me. I think it was the apple-pie made my head weak;" and the strange creature gave a little laugh.

"You were quite welcome," said Mark. "I dare say you needed the grub more than I did."

"I hope you won't know what it is to go hungry to bed, that's all; and to have breakfast off a cold turnip. If it's any good to say so, I'm sorry I took your things." He looked away for some time at the woods; then he sighed; then looked straight into Mark's eyes with a gravity that seemed beyond his years. "I'm done. Poachin' I don't take much count of, but 'jumpin' clothes is the start of the slide down into the drift and wash of tramps and hedge thieves, that go all up an' down this country. I guess we'll go to the keeper; maybe he can set my shoulder."

"Oh," said Mark, wincing. "I'm sorry; I forgot."

"It don't matter. I were forgotten when I was big enuff to crawl, and been that way ever since. It's to be the keeper, is it?"

"I say, would you like a fair start?" said Mark, slowly. "If you had a place offered you as under-keeper, will you act—would you——?"

"Would I act square, eh! What's the good of arstin' fool-questions? But if you are goin' to talk all day, I'll sit down again."

"Come on," said Mark; and they went off, too much interested—one with the novelty of the adventure, the other with his own troubles—to think of the strange figures they cut. They did not talk much, for Mark was busy with his thoughts, and the poacher was evidently weak and in pain. Their course was for the steward's house by an unfrequented road, and Mark smuggled his captive into his own room without being seen.

"Like a bath? but of course you would. Sit down, and I'll get your things off. So, by Jove? you are thin—bones sticking out. There now, slip into this night-gown, and get in between the sheets."

The strange boy climbed into the bed slowly, and stared at Mark like some wounded animal, with large clear brown eyes.

"We'll have that shoulder mended in no time. But, look here; while I'm gone, you won't make a bolt?—promise."

The boy looked from Mark to the window; then he shut his eyes, and his mouth went white about the lips. His cheek-bones were very prominent, the cheeks very hollow, and the face seemed the face of an old man.

Mark closed the door softly, stole down a few steps

lightly, then made a bolt for the little room in a bungalow, where Mr. Digby worked.

"Well, what is it?" asked the steward, sharply.

"There's a broken bone, sir, and I wish you would come quick. I think he's fainted."

"What the dickens!" began Mr. Digby, impatiently. Then he saw a concern in the boy's face. "Something wrong, eh? All right, I'll come." He caught up a hand-bag from a shelf, and hurried after Mark, with a hazy idea that at least one of the valuable shorthorn heifers had broken a leg.

"Don't frighten him," said Mark, stopping on the stairs. "He's awfully thin."

Mr. Digby may have been puzzled, but as it was clearly impossible for the heifer to be upstairs, he had regained his accustomed calm. A minute later he was turning back the sheet, and probing the shoulder with as much unconcern as if it were an every-day occurrence to find a strange lad in his house.

"Does it hurt?"

"What's the good of arstin' me that?" said the boy irritably.

Mr. Digby opened his bag, and, with certain sharp directions to Mark, went about his work.

"You bore that very well, my lad"

"And you did your part very well," was the unexpected reply. "There's no use tryin' to be soft with a bone that's out of joint. Make up your mind to push it back, and just push—see? I guess what I want now is beef-tea, and after that a good sleep, and then——"

"Well, what next?"

"I ain't sayin' nothin' about what's next."

"I'll see that you have your broth, and I think we can promise to leave you here for the night. Now, Mark, I would like to have a word with you."

They went downstairs into the library, and Mr. Digby lit a pipe.

"So you did catch the poacher after all, my boy?"

"How do you know, sir?" asked Mark, in his direct way.

"Tell me the whole story."

Mark told it all, and wound up with an earnest appeal to the steward, not only to forgive the boy, but to take him on as a sub-keeper.

Mr. Digby did not smile, or laugh, or sneer—one of the three things Mark most dreaded. He merely asked a question—

"And you believe all that stuff the fellow told you about his uncle?"

"I do, sir. I think if I had been brought up as he was, I would have done the same. It would spoil him altogether if he were sent to prison."

Mr. Digby nodded his head. "I like to hear you say that, Clinton. You're the right sort for the Colonies." He slapped the boy on the back. "We'll take a walk down to the keeper's lodge, and maybe he will let you have a shot at a rabbit or two."

"But the boy, sir?"

"I will have a talk with him to-morrow. But I may tell you this now, that the worst poachers—poachers who do the most damage—have turned out to be the best keepers."

Mark Clinton slept that night on a couch in his room, and was wakened in early morning by the sharp hiss of

a snake, followed by the frightened chatter of a monkey, which gave place to a long vibrating howl that chilled his blood. He sprang out of bed, and laid his hand on a cudgel in the corner, and stood on the defensive.

"What the dickens was that noise, Clinton?"

Mark threw the door open, discovering Mr. Digby on the landing, armed with a cavalry sword.

"I don't know, sir."

Outside the dogs were barking frantically, but in the room there was no sign of beast or reptile, though Mark declared the noise had come from under his bed.

Mr. Digby turned quickly to the lad. "Did you hear the noise?"

"I yeard it," said the boy, gravely turning his brown eyes to the four corners of the room. "Seemed to me it were a jackal and a black-faced monkey skeered to death by a slang."

"A slang?"

"Snake, boss! Them monkeys is powerful frighted by snakes."

"Could you imitate a jackal cry?" asked Mr. Digby, quietly.

"Maybe I could, boss," said the boy, wearily, "if it wasn't for the pain in my shoulder. Wants some cold water on it, I think."

Mr. Digby grunted, but he applied a wet poultice to the shoulder, which was now puffed.

"Next time you want anything, ask for it, and don't howl."

"Year that?" said the boy, in a whisper. "Just open the winder, boss."

Mr. Digby fumed, but he opened the window.

"It's plovers flyin' high," said the boy, eagerly. "They call that way in the dark of the night in my country 's if they lost their way. Jes' look, and I'll bring him down."

The boy moistened his lips with his tongue, and then gave the call of the plover. The flock overhead heard and answered. The call was repeated clear and loud. The leader alone gave the alighting cry, and the flock came down like sheets of paper sliding through the air.

"Did I fetch 'em, boss?"

"They're settled," said Mr. Digby, with a laugh. "Now lie back, my boy, and you'll have some broth. A gift like yours must be——"

"That's nothin'. You year me call in the woods. Why, I whistled a keeper down through the woods, him thinkin' a rabbit was squealin' from a stoat."

"Don't you tell him that."

"Oh, I ain't meanin' your old man Leggings, but a chap over yonder, who didn't know better'n to set slaaghuisters."

"Set what?"

"These traps with iron jaws and teeth. But I ain't talkin' any more. What I want is quiet and hot broth."

Mr. Digby turned away to hide a smile, and went out of the room.

"I say, young 'un."

"Are you speaking to me?" asked Mark.

"No harm in bein' young. I were young myself once, a long time agone, when we used to skeer the finches from the red corn. Oh ay; there was a old baboon skeered us. He came all of a sudden from behind a bush, and said, 'Oo-oo!' moving his eyebrows. My! you should 'a seen us run. I say, what did you tell the boss?"

"I told him everything."

"So? Well, I am sorry, but I ain't blamin' you."

"Thanks," said Mark, with sarcasm.

"I thought, maybe, from what you said, you'd got a plan in your head."

"Everything rests with you. If you tell the truth to Mr. Digby, I think he will give you a chance."

The boy frowned.

"Look here," said Mark, "he has treated you very well, and the best thing you can do is to tell him everything. That is, if you really want to get a new start."

"I guess that's the broth coming upstairs," said the boy with a grimace.

"When you get well," said Mark, quietly, "I will punch your head."

As he closed the door he was assailed, by way of parting, with the jeering cry of a jay—a sound so unexpected that the maid who was bringing up the broth dropped the tray, —a little accident which restored Mark's good humour.

CHAPTER III

THE LOST DIAMOND

A week went by, and Mark had learnt one lesson well—that was to take a hand at any job from stable-cleaning to dairy work. Mr. Digby held the opinion that no man could hope to succeed as a farmer anywhere who was afraid to take his coat off; and instead of leaving Mark to his own devices, he had set deliberately to work to prove his mettle. If the boy had been above his work, he would have sent him back to General Clinton with a certificate of unfitness, but Mark's strong good sense was superior to the instincts of his class. Many boys of his acquaintance would no more have consented to take up a pitchfork or a hoe than they would oblige by carrying a brown paper parcel through Hyde Park. Whatever else they might succeed in, those lads would never make good farmers. Mark had learnt to milk, in a fashion, having practised on an even-tempered shorthorn mother, who chewed the cud and reflectively swung her tail first into the bucket and then into his face. He could work the separator and make up butter, and his investigations had carried him into the kitchen, where he had actually learnt to mix the dough, knead it up, and set it to rise. The bread he baked was not inviting—it was given to the poultry; but still it was bread, and he was intensely gratified.

"I have written to your father, Clinton," said Mr. Digby, "to tell him that you've got all the makings of a good colonist."

"Thank you very much indeed."

"I have also suggested that if he intends to send you out soon, you had better take a holiday."

Mark looked dismayed.

"Don't think I am tired of you, my lad. I am not. You have been very useful indeed; but really there would be no good in your remaining. Even the best English farmers who go to the Cape have to start afresh, and the less you have to unlearn the better. If you are training a hunter to work over ploughed fields, you train him in that sort of country. You see, the conditions of farming, the climate, the country, the grass, are altogether different; but the main thing is willingness to work."

"Well, sir, I am much obliged for what you have done."

"I have been very glad to have you."

"Have you decided anything about the Colonial boy?" asked Mark, anxiously.

"I have something to say about him, Clinton."

"I hope you mean to employ him," said Mark, eagerly.

"I think not," said Mr. Digby, with a smile.

"What has he done now, sir?"

"Nothing very bad. I believe on his first night in the Home all the nurses and the night surgeon were groping about in the convalescent ward searching for a hedgehog, which, of course, they never found. No; he has done nothing outrageous; but I have found out who he is."

"He is a Colonial, isn't he?"

"Yes; his story to you was, I think, true. He was brought over here by an uncle who is living in London—in West Kensington. I have his address, and I want you to call on him."

"If you wish it," said Mark, readily.

"His name is Silas Futter, and the name of his nephew is Silas Amos. Mr. Futter is a man of means, and the object of your call will be to induce him to send his nephew out with you."

"By Jove!"

"You like the idea?"

"I think it ripping; and it's awfully good of you to take the trouble, you know."

"The trouble will be yours, Clinton. I am told that Mr. Futter is a hard nut."

"I'll crack him," said Mark, gaily. "He will have to send the chap out. What is his name, sir?"

"Amos—Si Amos. I will drive you out to the Home this afternoon, on your way to the station, and you can talk the matter over with him."

In the course of the afternoon Mr. Digby drove Mark up to a little Home, and left him there.

"Good-bye, my lad. Drop a line to say how you like your new life. Have nothing to do with the loungers, drink very little, even of water, and never shirk a job because you cannot see an immediate result. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sir, and thank you very much indeed."

Mark looked after the tall, spare figure with a feeling of gratitude, and then rang the bell. He found the boy Amos seated comfortably on a pretty verandah, busy with a knife.

"Halloa!"

"Halloa yourself!"

The boy did not look up. He was carving the outline of a snake on a stick, and he bent his head over the work.

"What's that you are carving?" asked Mark, after a long pause.

"Maybe it's a crocodile," said the boy, with a blank expression; "maybe it's a what's-'is-name; but any blind-eyed thingummy c'd tell it were a snake."

"And a jolly good snake," said Mark, pleasantly.

The boy glanced up under his brows suspiciously. "It's a boom-slang," he said, "climbin' up to get at a bird's nest. The nest is away up in the air, and you've got to think it's there—see? If the stick had been long enuff, I'd 'a made the nest with the eggs in, and the mother bird yellin' 'fire!' 'thieves!'—see?"

"Have you ever seen a snake at a nest?"

"Oh ay, a many times. Over yonder, in the deep kloofs, I've seed a rock-snake waitin' for dassies (coneys) when the sun was hot on the Krantz, and down in the bottoms, where the willow trees grew over the pools, I've seed the tree-snake slitherin' into the nests, oh ay, many a time." The boy leant back, with his eyes turned to the south.

"I say," said Mark, seizing the opportunity, "I'm going to ask your uncle to send you out there with me."

The brown eyes searched Mark's face in a startled gaze; then he went on carving, but with hands that shook a little.

"Your uncle lives in London; his name is Mr. Futter, and your name is Si Amos. I will call on your uncle to-morrow."

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"And he'll tell you to clear out," said Amos, fiercely.

"I hope not. Don't you want me to go?"

"What's the use?"

"I can talk to him. I can show him that it would be better in every way for you to go back."

"He knows that better 'n you. Talkin'! It's no good talkin'. He'll just sit an' smoke, like a wooden image. Maybe he'll grunt when you have talked all you can, and then he'll ring the bell, wavin' his hand for the man to show you out, and pick up his paper. That's what."

"But surely he will listen to reason? There's no good in letting you run wild. There is only one end to that sort of thing."

"He knows."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Mark, "that he is prepared to see you go right to the bad?"

"That's so."

"I can't believe that."

"You will to-morrow," said Amos, grimly, "if you go."

"Well, I will try," said Mark, firmly.

"You will, eh?"

"Yes, I will."

"Why, that's what I want to know. You don't know me. I'm nothin' to you—nix."

"I don't want to see you left to yourself."

"But why?"

"Because it isn't right. I don't like it."

"But you had a plan of speakin' to Mr. Digby for me."

"Mr. Digby himself thinks it would be best for you to go to the Cape. He asked me to call on your uncle."

"No use."

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“You don’t know. He might listen to me.”

“Oh, he’ll listen long ’nuff, but he won’t say anythin’—unless——”

“Unless——?”

The boy looked at his carving in silence for some time.

“Look here,” he said, “there’s one thing. He’s not a spending man, but he spent money to bring me over here. Why? To get square with himself for somethin’ he done—see? He meant to give me a chance; but when he got me over here, he begun to think he’d done more’n enuff. Now you’ve got to get at him there.”

“I don’t quite understand,” said Mark.

“I’m goin’ to tell you more,” said the boy, quietly. “When my father died way up the veld by the big river, there was one thing found in his bag which was brought to me by his black boy. I’ve kept it all along.” He searched inside his shirt, brought out a little skin bag, and withdrew an object rolled up in moss. “Tell me what that is.”

Mark took the object and turned it over. “Looks very much like a hollow pebble,” he said mystified.

“Like a stone almond-shell—smooth inside and rough out. But it ain’t. Guess again.”

“I give it up,” said Mark.

“That,” said Amos, impressively, “is a diamond’s coat. That’s what. Look inside, and you’ll see little marks on the smooth. Those marks were made by what they call the ‘facets’ of the diamond. It were a big diamond, bigger’n a thrush’s egg.”

“I never heard of a diamond having a coat.”

“Maybe. But I have. There’s been many a diamond lost ’cos its glitter has been covered by that shell. I been

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told it's a carbon shell. Anyway, the nut inside that shell were a big diamond. Well, my uncle were with my father, and that's all were in my father's bag. What became of the diamond?"

"You mean that your uncle——"

"I dunno." The boy drew the lids over his eyes, then opened them suddenly, and gave a wonderfully keen look at Mark.

"Then what do you mean?" asked Mark.

"This. When he has listened to you, and keeps on sayin' nothin', you up and arst him what become of the big diamond. But lor, you ain't got the pluck."

"Do you believe your uncle took the diamond, if there was one?"

"Where did he get his money from—eh?"

"How do I know?"

"Not from tradin', 'cos they lost their wagons in the big river. Not from cattle, 'cos he hadn't any. Not from selling land, 'cos he had no land. He got his money from somethin' he brought over here with him—see? And all he brought over were held in one box."

"Perhaps he brought his money in the box, or put it into the bank."

"I tell you he hadn't got any to pay. He landed poor, and within a month he were growin' rich. But it's no use talkin', 'cos I seed the diamonds on board. He used to shut himself up in his cabin at night. One night I swung out over on a rope, and looked in the port-hole. He'd got a whole heap of diamonds on a sheet of paper, a whole glitterin' heap, I tell you, with the fire runnin' up and down and in an' out; but, see here, the big diamond were not there."

"Very likely they were his own diamonds."

"Look here. I will tell you somethin'. Last time I saw my father he took me up on his knee, and he said to me, he said, 'Baasie, what would you like me to bring you—somethin' good?' he said. 'A gun,' I says—'a double gun.' 'Anything more?' he says; 'don't be afraid to ask.' So I said, 'A knife, with a hook and other things.' Well, he laughed with his eyes. 'Is that all?' he says. 'A horse,' I said; and he nodded. 'An', I says, 'some cows;' and he nodded. 'An' a fishin'-rod, an' a bag o' brown sugar.' Well, he laughed. 'You'll have 'em all, an' more, my little baasie,' he said; 'all, an' more, when I come back; for,' he said, 'I will be a rich man.' And all there was in his bag were that empty shell. My father were a man who only said what he meant. The Kaffirs said so, and they know—see?"

"I don't like your uncle," said Mark, after a long pause.

"Why did my father die?" the boy suddenly burst out. "He were a big man, hard an' tough, and sound as a buck. The Kaffirs said so. They said he never tired." The boy put out a hand, and sank his voice. "Tell me, why did he die up there on the veld alone, when he were huntin' for buck for the pot, 'cos the others were footsore an' heart-sick an' weak?"

Mark moistened his lips, and waited.

"You think my uncle killed him?"

"I?" began Mark, startled. "Why should you think so?"

Amos drew in his breath, then let it out in a shrill whistle.

"I were just talkin'," he said. "I meant you to have

this stick; but, see, it won't be finished. I guess you must be goin'. So long."

"But what's this about the diamond?"

"Eh? Nix — nothin' — just foolishness. So long. There's nurse comin' with the jelly." And he smiled at the nurse.

"Good-bye," said Mark, lingering.

"Halloa! thought you was gone. Remind me of a girl saying 'good-bye' in a railway carriage. I'll send you this stick by telegraft. I say."

"Well!"

"Oh, nix; but there's a place in London where they sell diamonds, and there's a chap there named Goodchild. You arst him. That's all."

Mark went on his way to the station in a state of bewilderment. The boy's story, told with dramatic force, had greatly impressed him, and the suggestion of a fearful crime remained with him, even after the excitement of arranging with his father the date of his departure for the Cape. The trail of the story was in his mind next morning, and he put a few leading questions to his brother Lawson.

"Can you sell diamonds anywhere?"

"I don't as a rule carry them about with me, but if I did I should not attempt to sell them to a greengrocer, for instance."

"What I want to know," said Mark, with elaborate patience, "is whether there is a market for diamonds."

"Have you a few to sell?"

"No, I haven't. I merely want to know; but of course, if you can't say, don't worry."

"I am advised that if you take the gems to Hatton Garden, you will find a market."

"Covent Garden Market is nearer," said Mark, with sarcasm.

"Hatton Garden is not a market for the sale of farm produce, it is not in any sense a garden, but a street, a rather dingy street, where merchants who deal in precious stones have their offices. It enters Holborn not far from Chancery Lane."

Mark took a 'bus to Holborn, and was directed to Hatton Garden by a policeman. It was not an imposing street, nor did the buildings have any outward sign of interior wealth. He was soon directed to the office of Mr. Goodchild.

"What can I do for you, young gentleman?" said a hidden some one, in rather thick tones.

Mark peered into the dark recesses, and at last fixed his eyes on the sparkle of a diamond pin. From that as a centre he made out dimly a hooked nose and a pair of twinkling eyes, and next the red blaze of a cigar, as the fleshy lips closed over the amber tube.

Mark went at once to the subject.

"I should be much obliged if you would tell me whether a Mr. Futter sold some diamonds about two years ago."

The diamond pin seemed to flare up, but that was because the smoker was puffing more vigorously, causing the cigar to glow.

"You haven't come from South Africa?" said the man in the dark.

"No; I am afraid——"

"Perhaps you have met some one who has been over there?"

"Yes, sir, I have."

"I am very pleased to meet you;" and Mr. Goodchild came forward and leaned on the counter. "Mr. Futter is a very nice gentleman."

"I have never met him."

"Ish dat so? Very good. You have met some one who knows Mr. Futter, but you yourself do not know that excellent gentleman. And if Mr. Futter did sell diamonds, what then?"

"Then, of course, I should know he had sold diamonds."

"Very good. Yes, you would know." The man pondered over this, as if it were a profound problem. "I see. And the people who want to know also?"

"I want to use the information, if possible, in the interest of Mr. Futter's nephew, who, I imagine, has met you."

"Ach! Then we will make a bargain. I will tell you all I know, and you will tell me all you know?"

"I have told you I know nothing. I have to see Mr. Futter to-day, and I wanted to know if he had made his money from diamonds."

"He did, young gentleman. I know because my name was on the cheque for a cool £40,000."

"By Jove!" muttered Mark, awed a little.

"And will you tell me why you want to see Mr. Futter?"

"Simply to persuade him to send his nephew out to the Cape with me."

"I see. Yes, I have met that boy. Where is he now?"

Mark gave the address of the Home.

"Good. Now, look here, young gentleman, if the

uncle does not send the boy out, you bring him to me, and, maybe, I will pay his passage."

Mark looked at the merchant squarely, rather surprised at this development.

"You think it is a strange offer for me to make, but it is not so strange as it seems. When you came in I was thinking of Mr. Futter. I have been thinking about him ever since I bought his diamonds; and you—by the way, who sent you to me?"

"The boy mentioned your name."

"Did he tell you where the diamonds were found?"

"I don't think he did; but, of course, they were found on the Diamond-Fields, weren't they?"

"Mr. Futter said they were found in De Beer's mine in the days before Mr. Rhodes bought out the last miner's rights, but I know better. They did not come from De Beer's; they did not come from the River Diggings; they did not come from the mines in the Orange Colony. Now you know why I would send the boy out."

"You think perhaps he could find out where the diamonds came from."

"If he knows anything," said the merchant, in short dry tones, "I am prepared to offer the same terms to him that I would to a sharp man of business. So much, young gentleman, and no less. Good day to you."

Mark left the office elated, but soon became grave. That mystery about the diamonds grew on him—a double mystery—one part connected with the place of the finding, and the other with the death of Mr. Amos. The mystery was with him when, later in the day, he stood on a doorstep in Kensington, prepared to tackle Mr. Futter.

"Is Mr. Futter in?"

"I will take in your card, sir," said a solemn footman.

Mark presented one of his father's cards, with the "Gen." scored out, and his own name neatly written above.

The footman placed the card in the wide expanse of a silver tray, and withdrew. Presently appearing, he held a door open, and Mark passed silently over thick carpets into a library, the footman entering to hand him a chair facing a large window. Then the man retired, so noiselessly that Mark looked round to see if he had gone, watched the door silently close, and then stared at the stiff rows of stiff books in stiff bindings—the sort of books that one could never become familiar with. Then he stared at the table, the window, and the curtains.

"Well?"

Mark started. There was a man seated in one of two big armchairs, with his back to the window, though how he got there, unless he came from under the table, Mark could not tell.

"I beg your pardon, but I did not see you come in."

The man said nothing, unless a sort of dry smile which showed his teeth could be taken as an answer.

"I came to see you," said Mark, and stopped.

The man picked up a paper-knife, dagger-shaped, and dug the point into a pad of blotting-paper. His teeth were the only white spot about him, except the rim of his collar. A black beard covered his shirt-front, his hair was black, his complexion was dark, and his hands were covered on the back with black hair. His hair was black and fell in a thick mass on his shoulders. There was a splash of ink on the pad, and he aimed at it till he finally drove the

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blade into the centre; then he looked up at Mark, showing the whites of his eyes.

“Are you Mr. Futter?” began Mark, courteously.

A nod.

“My name is Clinton. I met your nephew in the country, in fact, I caught him poaching. He is in a hospital.”

“From a gun-shot?” snapped the man.

“His collar-bone was broken, and general weakness brought on fever.”

Evidently Mr. Futter did not think the information called for a remark. He folded his hands and looked at Mark, merely raising his eyebrows.

Mark flared up at once. “I think it a beastly shame,” he said hotly, “that a chap should be left to the kindness of strangers.”

Mr. Futter placed a finger on the striker of a table-bell.

Mark immediately changed his tactics. “I would be awfully obliged if you would send him out with me. I am going to the Cape, you know.”

Mr. Futter did not know, and did not care, but he did not press the button, though he kept his finger on the striker.

“You see, your nephew, I am afraid, is out of his element over here, and he wants to get back to a place where he could make a living without—well, without taking other people’s game. I should like him to go with me. We might help each other, and I thought if I mentioned this you would be willing to pay his passage out.”

“Is that all?”

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"That is all," said Mark. "There is a lot more to be said if I knew how to say it."

"You need not. Good day."

Mark flushed, then his firm mouth grew fixed. "Do you mean to say that you will leave your nephew to the care of strangers—to die or go to the dogs?"

Mr. Futter pressed his finger. "Anything more?" he said suavely.

"Yes." Mark stood up and stepped up to the table. "I would like to know what became of that big diamond."

Mark was startled at the effect of his speech. The dark man did not start, or bluster, or seek to cover his confusion: he seemed to shrink as one who feared a blow he could not ward off. His hands slid off the table and his head sank.

"Yes, sir." It was the voice of the solemn footman.

Mr. Futter raised a hand to his throat, then, after a hoarse gasp, he bellowed an order to the man to leave the room. The door closed, and Mark, with a feeling of intense repulsion, saw a grown man fighting for his composure, and as he grew obviously nervous, the other more quickly gained the mastery over himself.

"A touch of the ague," he said with a smile that showed his teeth. "It often troubles me. I think you were speaking when the seizure came on."

"It does not matter," said Mark, who felt very uncomfortable.

"Something about a diamond, I think—a big diamond, was it not? I did not hear very distinctly." The words were uttered carelessly, but the eyes were very bright and watchful.

"I did," said Mark; "but I am sorry if my question——"

"No occasion, Mr. Clinton, not in the least. It is I who will be sorry if you do not give me an opportunity of affording you any information I can."

"Perhaps, then," said Mark, "you will tell me if you would do something for your nephew."

"I am very willing to do everything in my power. I have merely been giving him a free rein, and when he has proved to his own satisfaction that he cannot get on by himself, I will take him in hand. He is a strange lad," mused Mr. Futter, with his eyes on Mark's face—"a strange lad, with queer fancies. I dare say you have noticed it. Of course he knew you were coming to see me?"

"He did."

"And no doubt in his love of mischief he suggested that you should ask me about a large diamond. Now, it happens that a large diamond was once stolen from me."

Mark did not like the look in the man's eyes, and the change from rude silence to this sudden confidence made him suspicious.

"All I wish to know," he said, "was whether you would let Amos go out with me."

"You appear to have taken a very sudden liking for my nephew," said Mr. Futter, softly. "It is only because of this sudden friendship, of course, that you have taken the trouble? Doesn't it strike you as being rather curious that you, a general's son, should be so interested in a young do-nothing?"

"I think he has had hard lines," said Mark, stoutly.

"Exactly; but I have never yet heard that misfortune and roguery were passports to a man's friendship. Perhaps there is some other inducement?"

"None in the least," said Mark, who saw that he was once again being cross-examined. He prepared to go.

"Allow me," said Mr. Futter, rising and moving round the table to the door. He rubbed his chin, turning the beard up against his face, and staring thoughtfully at Mark out of the thicket. "Won't you tell me what you meant just now when you mentioned a large diamond?" he asked, letting his beard down, and pressing his thumb on the point of the dagger. "Don't be afraid to speak. We are alone in the house."

Mark met the man's gaze steadily.

Mr. Futter continued: "Quite alone! Now, look here." He suddenly changed his tone. "Let us have no nonsense. You were sent here by the diamond-broker, Goodchild."

"I was not."

"And you did not lunch with him, of course, and he did not drive you here—eh?"

"You asked if he sent me. He did not."

"You will find it better, young man, to tell me the truth at once, before you make me angry. What do you know of diamonds? what do you know of me or my nephew?"

"Nothing very good," said Mark, defiantly.

Before he could throw his hand up, the man's grip was on his throat, and he was flung back into a chair.

"Don't you think you had better tell me all?"

Mark heard the words dimly. He was sitting gasping for breath, with a ringing in his ears and a mist before his eyes.

"I am sure," said Mr. Futter, slowly, "you would not wish to annoy me again."

Mark turned his head with an effort, and saw that the other was seated on the table.

"You big bully!" he gasped.

"Excuse me. You come into my house as a spy, and insult me. I think you will admit that you have been in the wrong—eh? I did not ask you to speak, but you took it upon yourself to make certain hints. I think we can settle this without violence, for you must see that you owe it to me to explain. First of all, are you working for Mr. Goodchild?"

Mark had not played football without learning something of the art of "handing off," and suddenly Mr. Futter found himself on the broad of his back. He sprang up with an oath, and looked wickedly around.

"Take care, sir," said Mark. "I know how to protect myself, and by George I will."

Mr. Futter glared angrily for a full minute, then broke into a harsh laugh.

"I wish," he said, "my nephew were like you."

Mark stood on his guard.

"Now, look here, Mr. Clinton, let us settle this matter pleasantly. Did that man Goodchild suggest that you should ask me about the diamond?"

"No, he did not."

"My nephew, then?"

"Your nephew," said Mark, "is ill. He explained to me why he came to England, and why he wants to go back."

"Just so, and the reason why he wishes to go back is to find the big diamond—eh?"

"I know nothing about that," said Mark, quietly.

"Or the place where that diamond and others were found, perhaps?"

"He wants to go back because it is his home, and he would be with friends there." Mark eyed the man firmly.

"Thank you," said Mr. Futter; "but let me give you a word of warning. In South Africa men have disappeared for knowing even as little as you seem to know."

Mark smiled at the menace in the words, but he did not soon forget the cruel look in the small black eyes.

Mr. Futter opened the door and passed out, leaving his visitor to find his way out for himself.

CHAPTER IV

A BRACE OF SHARKS

For several days Mark Clinton did not hear of the boy Amos, and only gave him a passing thought. Even the mystery of the diamonds, which had conjured a very complete nightmare, had lost its attraction beside the real romance of getting together an outfit. General Clinton had insisted that there was no necessity for Mark to take much with him, but when he went out with his son down to a big store where there is everything that no explorer ever wants, from a knife which grows a fork and spoon on one stem, to a bungalow, he forgot his own wisdom.

If Mark had been a young lieutenant in a swagger regiment, preparing for a campaign where transport was difficult and luxuries a nuisance, he could not have got together a more imposing collection of lumber. There was a folding bed with a bamboo frame, that could be taken to pieces and made into a chair or a hammock, if the owner were very patient in the way he handled the parts; there was a lovely picnic basket, fitted with collapsing mugs without handles, and with large wicker-work compartments for small things, so that when the plates and the mugs and the other things were tucked in their little beds, there would be room left for a couple of slender sandwiches. Long afterwards, when one of the

mugs collapsed at the wrong moment, pouring a trickle of hot coffee down Mark's sleeve, he swapped the basket for a torn haversack. Then there was a jack-knife, furnished with a bristling assortment of Lilliputian carpenter's tools, with a pair of scissors thrown in, tweezers stowed away in the handle, a cartridge-extractor at the butt end, and a hook at the other for extracting pebbles from a horse's hoof; it weighed a pound, and was really not as handy as a single-bladed weapon. He bought a leather belt to hang the knife on, and a broad leather pig-skin belt, fitted with money-bags, which was useful; also a cholera belt, which, because it was made of flannel and about six inches wide, he probably resolved not to wear. Then came luxuries, in the shape of a collapsible bath of rubber, a rubber air-pillow, a wooden table that could be turned into a chair, and a bookshelf, a cork helmet almost big enough for a sailing boat, and a self-extracting revolver. Added to these were other things really useful: a little flat medicine chest of tin, which would take six bottles of quinine, quinine and ammonia, rhubarb, and podophyllin pills, with a bottle of chlorodyne; a pair of riding-boots laced over the ankles, a pair of gaiters, a Martini carbine sporting built, a second-hand fowling-piece No. 12 bore; and brother Lawson came out splendidly by contributing a military chest of drawers, brass-bound, oak-built, deep-chested, short and squat—a comprehensible bit of furniture, which was at once a stow-away, a washstand, a table, a writing-desk, a seat, and a cupboard.

Clinton held a levee, and his chums came and sighed over the outfit, bemoaning the fate which kept them in a country where they could only make pretence of camping

out, on the banks of the Thames, or in a wood labelled "Trespassers will be prosecuted." He put on his cord breeches, his canvas coat furnished with pockets everywhere, even in the back, buckled on his belt, drew on his boots, and presided with much dignity, seated on a bamboo bed. He set out his medicine chest, and even allowed a particular chum to swallow a quinine pill. They took the guns to pieces, worked the loading-machine, studied a map of South Africa, and talked of big game, of undiscovered gold-fields, and buried treasures. Some of the chums brought presents. Of course, there was a fat leather case which revealed two briar pipes, and Mark made himself very uncomfortable in an effort to smoke a particularly strong mixture.

It was a happy time. The days slipped by as if the time machine had been well-oiled, and when a packer came and boxed all the treasures up, painted M. C. in large white letters on the outside, when red labels with the word "Hold" were pasted on, and all the cases were bundled into a van for the docks, Mark felt that he had lost his best friends. He entered on the next stage—became restless, depressed, full of gloomy predictions, varied by occasional flashes of enthusiasm in which he generously, in advance, out of boundless hopes, provided his father with a cheque for a thousand, Lawson with a stuffed lion to attract clients, and his medical brother with a few specimens of snakes preserved in spirits.

It was then that his memory, clouded by the thoughts of his departure, was recalled to the episode of the boy poacher. The last post brought him a parcel and two letters. The parcel was long and narrow. He expected a fishing-rod from an aunt, and it proved to be a fine

"balance"-stick made from rhinoceros' horn, beautifully polished, and so skilfully made that it was as light as a cane. He fell in love with it before he read the name of the giver, otherwise he would have obeyed his first impulse to send it back, for the tag on the parcel bore the words. "With Mr. Futter's well wishes." Fortunately, as it turned out, the General settled the matter.

"That's a beautiful stick, my boy," he said, taking it up, and examining the large oval-shaped knob, as big as an emu's egg. "By Jove, it balances well."

"I think I ought to return it, dad."

"Return it! why? Let me see the tag. Mr. Futter! who is Mr. Futter?"

"He's uncle of a chap I met, down at the farm," said Mark, turning red, for he had kept the incident to himself.

"Write a letter, thanking him for his kindness. I should not be surprised if it were a 'balance'-stick, made either by chance or skill by native carvers. You could not wish for a better weapon. Feel it."

Mark took the stick, and his scruples vanished. "There are two queer marks on the knob."

"Let me see!" The General put on his glasses to study the subject. "Quite so. Yes, yes; that stick, Mark, has been used as a battle-axe. There was a hole through the top, which has been filled in with resin or something of that sort."

"A battle-axe," said Mark, recapturing the stick and swinging it about. "I think I will keep it after all."

"Of course, and mind you write and thank him."

The General went off, and Mark opened his letters. Both produced a sensation. The one was from Mr. Digby, wishing him good luck, and announcing the startling fact

that the boy Amos had bolted. "The extraordinary thing," said Mr. Digby, "is that the boy disappeared at the very moment his uncle—Mr. Futter—had called to see him. As the uncle stepped in at the front door, Amos must have vanished over the wall. His uncle was very much annoyed, and, in the first outburst, suggested, I am told, that that 'young rascal, Clinton,' must have been mixed up in the matter. Fortunately, the boy's nurse had no difficulty in showing that the boy had not received any message from you, and that, in point of fact, he had been very much put out because you did not write. I have told Fanshawe to keep a good look-out in case the boy pays another visit to our coverts." Mark was very much upset, but the contents of the next letter disturbed him even more. It contained a crisp ten-pound note, with a scrawl on a slip of paper—

"With the compliments of Mr. G——"

Mark held the note at arm's length, and stared at it as though it were a scorpion. Then he re-read Mr. Digby's letter, and turned the note over and over. Next he examined the stick, to see whether it could throw any light on the matter, but the stick merely balanced itself like an acrobat, and he sat down to think. The note evidently came from Mr. Goodchild, the diamond-broker. Mr. Goodchild had, he remembered, said something about a note, but that was only in case he took Amos to the broker's office, and he had not taken Amos. That strange youth had evidently gone back to his wild life. Then why had he paid this note? There was one thing to do, and he did it at once. Folding the note into an envelope, he directed it to Mr. Goodchild, and straightway went out to the post. That relieved him for the time, until he began to think of Amos, when he was filled with regret. The

regret, while it lasted, was very deep, but the young spirit throws off the indigestion of the mind with the same ease that the young stomach overcomes the effect of green fruit; and with the daylight, Mark had his own affairs to think of. The English boy is no hand at saying Good-bye. It is a distasteful piece of work, and he would like to get it over in the cellar if possible. Mark's voice was a little gruffer than usual when he braced himself up to say Good-bye to his mother; he tried to get off a very damp sort of joke on his sister; he looked very fierce at Lawson, and he made a bolt before the cab pulled up. His father smiled a little grimly under his white moustache, and began to talk of something that interested him in the paper. The boy was sitting on his safety-valve, and the old warrior, who had been through the same scene, pretended that their drive was merely an ordinary performance. When the docks were reached at last, and the General had inspected the cabin, he took his boy aside, and said all he had to say in a sentence.

"Whenever you get in a tight place, my boy, whenever you feel that you are not doing quite the right thing, just think how we should like you to act. You know what I think about drinking, and so on. Good-bye, my son."

"Good-bye, sir," said Mark, fervently; and he went to the side to watch the erect figure, more straight than ever, as it threaded a way between the porters and trucks. He waved his hand as his father turned, and the General gave a grave military salute, then disappeared. Mark stood open-eyed, staring into space, with a feeling like lead in his breast; then he looked around for some one to talk to. There was the second officer, standing with his hands

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behind him, staring down into the hold. He looked lonely, and Mark approached him.

“Do you think——” he began, with a friendly smile.

“No, I don’t,” said the “second,” wearily. “We may have a fine voyage, and we may not; it may be rough, and again, it may not. I don’t know. Ask the purser, or the steward, or the captain’s boy. I’m busy.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mark, stiffly.

“Thanks very much. If you don’t mind moving, perhaps you will not be capsized into the hold.”

Mark laughingly dodged a descending pile of baggage at the end of a chain, and lost himself in a maze of passages amidships. Escaping by the main staircase, no longer the “companion way,” he emerged on the hurricane deck, where a hairy quartermaster was splicing a rope, and the first officer, with his hands behind him, was carrying on an animated conversation with a lady-passenger. That is to say, the lady was talking and smiling, while the “first” was dividing his attention between the gangway, the quay, and the “donkey-engine.”

“I always think,” said the lady, gushingly, “that it is so restful when the ship is rocked on the vast bosom of the calm ocean.”

“Yes’m,” said the first, absently; then in a voice like a trumpet, “Stir yourself, there; get a move on; that package is not going to walk aboard!” Then, in a polite aside, “Yes, madame.”

The quartermaster winked at Mark, and Mark winked back. It was absurd for passengers to bother the officers when they were up to their eyes in work. So when he encountered the third officer standing with folded arms, he severely repressed the desire to tell him that there was a

black smudge across his forehead, and contented himself by keeping out of the way of panting stevedores and excited stewards until the big ship was out on the river, when the spasm was over, and people began to talk of lunch. Thereafter to Capetown the most exciting moments were those which immediately followed the clamour of the bell for meals, and Mark was surprised to find how thoroughly tired it was possible to grow of the sea, and the steamer, and some of the jokes. Even the flying-fish ceased to interest him after he discovered that they were more plentiful than sparrows in London; and if it had not been for the pleasure of looking forward to lunch when breakfast was over, and for the anticipation of dinner all through the steaming afternoons, the dulness would have been insufferable. In the mornings he played quoits, in the afternoon cricket, and in the evening he did the best thing he could do by playing on the piano instead of stewing in the smoking-room. Thanks to a splendid appetite and constant exercise, he arrived at Port Elizabeth jetty as brown as a sun-baked colonist, with a vast amount of information of no value, which had been poured into him by fellow-passengers, who, not being farmers themselves, naturally felt that they were well qualified to teach farming to a new chum.

Twenty-four days after leaving Southampton he was ashore amid people who, though strangers, were very much like the folk he had last seen in England. The brilliant blue of the sky, the wide stretch of gleaming sands of the bay, the black "boys" on the jetty, the combing breakers, and the far view inland to the drab expanse where the Addo Bush spread wide,—these were new; but the speech about him was the speech of his

race, the speech of the British settlers who, some eighty years before, had been dumped down on the same white sands, and who, out of a wilderness, had built up the great town before him, and had set the mark of their enterprise from the coast to the Zambesi. A silent-tongued Colonial on board had lent Mark a book on the settlers, and in the face of the vast difficulties that band of untrained men, of frail women, and weak children, had overcome, he was prepared to face his little troubles with a firm spirit. For them there had been all the terrors of an unknown and savage land; for him there were all the adjuncts of civilization. There was a railway to carry him on his next step—to Grahamstown, where he was bound. So he saw his luggage placed on a truck, and set off down the long jetty for the station at its shore end. As he walked on, deeply interested in the performances of a party of Zulus, who were landing rails from a surf-boat, moving in time to a deep-chested chant, he was addressed by an amiable stranger. He recognized the man as a passenger who had joined the steamer at Capetown, but with whom he had only exchanged a "good morning." He was a lean man, with a smooth face, watery eyes, and a manner of over-done politeness. He walked with a swagger.

"Where are you going to put up, Clinton?" he said familiarly.

"I don't know. I thought of catching the train, if there is one about to leave."

"Let's see"—the stranger pulled out a watch—"noon exactly. There'll be no train; only travel in the cool of the evening. You come with me. Be glad to show you the lions—ostrich feather market, wool market, and so on."

"I will go to the station first, thanks."

"That's right. Put your luggage in the cloak-room, and I'll do the same. Leave it to me; been through the ropes myself, and know the customs people."

"It's very kind of you," began Mark, with rather a doubtful look at the other.

"Not in the least. My name is Wicks, Sam Wicks, and I always like to look after a new chum. Ha! ha! It's a duty we owe the old country, you know, to make things pleasant for the guest."

The affable Wicks only carried a small handbag himself, and his appearance was not in his favour; but he was so genuinely anxious to be of service that Mark gave way. His luggage was very soon cleared by the stranger, who, however, appeared to have some little difficulty over his own bag.

"Look here," he said, taking Mark aside; "it's deuced awkward and all that, but the fact is, there is a little amount to pay on some cheap trinkets I have brought along with me for presents to a few friends. My money is all in my heavy boxes, which will not be landed until this afternoon—merely a matter of 15s., which I think you will lend me."

"Certainly," said Mark, getting at his money-belt.

"Make it a sovereign," said the stranger, lightly. "It's easier to pay back."

Mark made it a sovereign, and the bag was handed over by the customs officer, who, meeting Mark's eye, lifted his eyebrows.

"Now we'll just toddle into the cloak-room," said the stranger, "leave our things there, and have a little refreshment at my expense." And off he went to the station,

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which was the nearest building to the jetty, where he handed over the luggage to the cloak-room attendant.

"That's done," he said, pocketing both the checks. "Half-a-crown for the porter. Thanks. Your train leaves at 6.30, so we have lots of time to see the sights. Come along."

They went up a short, wide street to the market-place, where Clinton stood wondering over the lumbering ox-wagons with their spans of eighteen oxen yoked to a long "trek-touw," or chain.

"Come here before breakfast," said the stranger, "and you will see fifty of those wagons drawn up, and loaded with farm produce, firewood, pumpkins, fruit, oat-hay and so on. Here's a bar. Come in. It's my shout this time. My poison's whisky; what's yours?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Nix, nothing. Nonsense; you must 'wet' your landing, or ther'll be a drought in the land, or an earthquake or something. Put up two whiskys, barman."

Mark's whisky remained untouched, and a man lounging on the counter reached out a hand towards the glass.

"May I?" he said.

"If you like," said Mark; and the glass was emptied at a gulp.

"Well, I'm blowed," said the first stranger, setting down his glass and thrusting his hands into his pockets.

The second stranger drew the back of his hand across his mouth and grinned.

"I think we've met before," he said.

"I don't think so," said the first stranger.

"What? You don't know me?"

"No, sir; I do not."

"Don't know Billy Brent?"

"Billy! are you Billy? Bless my soul. Shake!"

They shook hands with great heartiness, and then in turn shook hands with Mark, with the unaffected glee of two large overgrown boys.

"Who'd 'a thought it?" said Billy. "Well, well," and he shook hands again.

"And what are you doing here, Billy?"

"Same old game. Waiting for my pay, which is due to-day, but won't be paid till to-morrow."

"Have you struck it rich?"

"A clear thousand, Sammy. A cool thousand, my boy, and not a 'ticky' under. But what do you think? Have another."

"I don't mind if I do, Billy."

"The same, barman—twice. A clean thousand, Sammy; that's how much; but look at the luck, though, that's comin' to me. I want a miserable twenty to strike a bargain. Have you got it about you?"

"No, old man. My cash-box is in my luggage, else I'd lend it to you, and more, like a shot."

"Well, it's deuced hard lines. However, there's no use in crying."

"What's the bargain, Billy?"

Billy Brent looked at the barman and moved away from the counter.

"It's this," he said in a whisper. "I could pick up a pair of greys for a £20 note, and they'd fetch £50 on the market, Sammy. Now, if you'd got the money about you, I'd let you go halves."

"What a chance!" groaned Sammy.

Then they both looked at Mark.

"Perhaps," said Billy, "your friend could stump up."

"I wouldn't ask him, mate. He does not know you, and it would not be fair, would it, Mr. Clinton?"

"Where are the horses?" said Mark.

"Quite right," said Billy. "That's business, that is. 'Where are the horses?' says you, meaning that you would like to see before you part. Come right along, sonny, and you too, Sammy."

They went out, and down a by-street at the back of some huge warehouses, reached the main street, and followed it for a mile into a straggling quarter, Billy all the time impressing upon Mark the necessity of being cautious. The walk was long; there was a hot wind blowing down the dusty street, and Sammy announced that his left leg was developing its old weakness from that "bullet-wound." He would wait their return in a bar, if they did not mind. So he turned aside, limped wearily into a little green-house, after impressively delivering over his "young friend" to the care of Mr. Billy. The two went on a little further, when Mark suddenly grew suspicious.

"How much further?" he asked.

Billy looked anxiously ahead. "It is far," he said slowly. "I didn't deny that it was far; but we're getting on fine."

"Can you see the place?"

"Can I see the place?" He shaded his eyes. "Why, in course, sonny. See that wagon outspanned over there? Well, that's it."

"I don't see any horses."

"Billy stared at the wagon in surprise, then swept

his eyes over the gentle slope of the grey hills. "See them horses away over yonder? Well, that's 'em. Come along."

They reached the wagon—a half-tent wagon, with the trek-touw outstretched, and a heavily built man with a "wideawake" hat slouched over his eyes, sitting outside the "disselboom," or wagon-pole. Billy addressed the individual in the Dutch *patois* that does duty as a base medium of conversational small change on the roads.

The man, who was splicing a whip-stick, said "ja" at intervals, until Billy had ended his oration, when he slowly descended his perch, blew at the embers of a fire, piled on some dry sticks, and filled a kettle with water from the wagon-cask or "vaitje."

"What does he say?" asked Mark.

Billy took him aside. "It's all right," he whispered, "if you do as I say. He doesn't mind trading with me as an old friend, but he wouldn't sell to a 'rooinek' like you. You give me the money—see? and I'll do the bargaining, while you go and look at the horses."

"I don't think so," said Mark.

"As you please," said Billy, shrugging his shoulders; "but if you had only said so at first I would not have taken this fool-journey. He's making coffee, which is a sign that he is ready to trade; and what'll he say? Besides, sonny, this is half my bargain, you know. He'll throw in a couple of saddles, and we could ride back—supposing you can sit a horse."

"I can ride," said Mark, attracted by the prospect.

"Good. We'll ride back, see the auctioneer, have a line in the papers, and sell 'em to-morrow on the market."

"But why didn't he sell them on the market?"

"'Cos he owes the auctioneer a matter of £50 over

some oxen he bought, and so he would get nix—see? He'd rather have £20 in his pocket. Believe me, sonny, it's a real bargain. But please yourself."

Mark hesitated. The man looked as if the matter were of no consequence to him beyond the trouble he had been put to; and he unbuttoned his coat to get at his money-belt. Besides, horse-trading was a part of the business of farming that he was to make his living by.

"I have only bank-notes," he said.

"Hand them over," said the man, rather gruffly.

Mark buttoned up his belt again.

"Look sharp about it!"

"On second thoughts," said Mark, coolly, "I have decided to keep my money."

"What? what's that?" and Mr. Brent scowled. "Now, look here, don't you go to make game of me! That won't wash—see? You've made that bargain, and you've got to pay."

"Is that the idea?" said Mark. "I begin to think that you and your friend are a couple of sharpers."

Mr. Brent took his hat off and flung it on the ground, as if he were annoyed with it; then he took off his coat, and carefully folded it up. Next he rolled up his sleeves, then spat on his hands.

Mark watched these proceedings with a steady eye.

"I'll give you one chance," said Mr. Brent. "You pay up with a suvring over for taking my character away, and—I'll not hurt yer."

Mark laughed.

"You'll laugh wrong side your mouth when I've done with you, my young smarty. Smell that." He poked his fist under Mark's nose, and quick as lightning Mark

delivered a telling blow on the man's jaw, which made him reel.

"Steady all!" It was the man at the wagon who spoke, as he stepped between.

"Lemme get at him!" roared Mr. Brent.

"Voetsack!" said the wagoner.

"What! You stand aside, Dave Robey; stand aside, I say, and see me smash him to bits."

"Scoot, I tell you! or by gum I'll smash you. There's your coat," and the wagoner kicked his coat away. "If you're not out of sight in five minutes I'll put the police on your tracks."

Billy Brent picked up his coat and slunk off, muttering. The man, Dave Robey, turned to Mark and favoured him with a long stare; then he held out his hand.

"It was very good of you," said Mark, heartily; "but I was not afraid of the man."

"Ja, sonny. How did you come by him?"

Mark told how he had met the two men.

"So? Well, I'll just go in with you."

"Please don't trouble."

"Oh, it's nix; but maybe they're after your boxes."

"By Jove! what an ass I was to let him keep my check?"

CHAPTER V

A SURPRISE MEETING

The two of them walked into town, caught a tram, and arrived at the station just as Mr. Sam Wicks, the first of the two rogues, put in an appearance. When he saw them he bolted at once. Mark had a little difficulty in clearing his boxes, and the night train had left before he was ready.

"It's an awful nuisance."

"In a hurry?" said Robey, who had remained with Mark all the time.

"Not particularly; but the fact is I don't want to spend too much money. I am out here to farm, you know."

"Goin' to Grahamstown?"

"Yes."

"So? Well, I'm going there too."

"I hope we shall meet there, I am sure."

"What I were goin' to say is, there's heaps of room in my wagon for you and your boxes—see? And it would only cost your living—say ten shillings."

"Really?" began Mark. "It is awfully good of you."

"I reckon not. You'd maybe like travelling by wagon. See the country and the shooting."

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"I'd like to go very much," said Mark, with a look into the man's honest blue eyes.

"There's one thing," said Dave, slowly.

"Yes."

"It's this. There's another chap coming with me. He'd, of course, grub with us."

"Of course."

"Then you don't mind? That's good."

"They put the boxes on a hand-cart and set off, calling in at a shop to buy some stores for the road—a few loaves of bread, sugar, coffee, tinned butter, tinned milk, and a side of mutton, which Mark paid for, as the food represented his share. They reached the wagon at sunset, and Dave Robey announced his intention to trek at once.

"But where are the oxen?" asked Mark.

David lounged a few yards from the wagon, and, lifting his twelve feet of bamboo whip-stick with a tapering top like a fishing-rod, he swung out the twenty feet of thong till it lay like a long, thin black snake in the dust. Then he brought the thong behind him with the skill of a fly-fisher, and "whirr, whang," the thin round fore-slag, made of bush-buck hide, lashed out with a report, as it struck the ground, of a rifle-shot. Three times David did this, then with a turn of his wrists coiled the thong about the stick and placed the whip on the wagon rail, after which he made fast the water-vaitje. In ten minutes the oxen hove in sight out of a grey veld, and in half an hour they were ranged up in line fronting the trek-touw. They were a "vaal," or yellow span, of eighteen big-boned, large-horned oxen in sleek condition, and David Robey, looking for the first time brisk and alive, spoke to them by name as he looped the rheims round the base of the horns, and

pulled each in his turn to take his proper place over on the opposite side, where a little scarecrow of a Kaffir boy, who had been tending them, kept them in place. When they were arranged in line again, the heavy yokes were lifted one by one; the skeis at one end fitted over the neck of the left-hand ox, and the skeis at the other end over the right-hand ox, and the throat-straps hitched round from the end of one "skei," or neck-stick, to the other. When all were yoked, the span stood with their heads at right angles to the wagon, and the chain before them instead of between—all, that is, except the wheelers, or "achter oss," who were on each side the heavy pole. Mark wondered how it would be possible for the oxen to pull.

"Trek!" said David, flourishing his whip, "trek fore!"

The oxen thrust out their necks like tortoises, strained, grunted, and in a trice the heavy chain slipped up over the shoulders of the right-hand oxen, scraped along their backbones, and fell into its proper position.

"That seems wrong," said Mark. "Why don't you harness the oxen?"

"'Cos an ox doesn't pull: he shoves—see? Bull calves push head to head, and so do oxen when they wish to see who is baas, and so do grown bulls when fighting. His strength is in the head and shoulder, and the yoke fits against the hump—see?"

Mark looked at Dave, who at that moment was performing what he thought was a perilous feat. Putting one hand on the rump of a wheeler, he slipped in between the wheels and the first wheeler, stepped to the round and swaying dissel-boom, and then to the wagon-box, whence he surveyed his team with an eye of pride.

"England, you skepsel! (rascal); Kaffirland, you

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slechter skelpot! (wretched tortoise); trek, you arme trap suitjes! (miserable slow trampers)," said David, making his whip writhe over the heads of the oxen without touching one.

"Jump in behind," said Dave; and Mark ran round to the back, making a jump, and wriggling in.

"Halloa! Mind my feet."

"Are you the other passenger?" said Mark, peering into the darkness of the tent. "I hope we'll have a pleasant journey. I'm quite new to this sort of thing."

"It don't want telling."

Mark began to think that his fellow-passenger was not all that he could wish.

"I suppose," drawled the stranger, "you ain't been catching any more poachers?"

Mark gasped.

"Nor been killing any turnips?"

"How the dickens——" began Mark; then he caught hold of a foot, and pulled. "Come out of that, you young beggar!"

The "young beggar" laughed, and Mark laughed.

"To think of seeing you!"

"And to find that Dave's new chum was you—begum!"

"And I thought you were a sulky——"

"And you were a stuck-up——"

"And it's Amos! But I thought you had bolted from the Home."

"So I did; and caught the first ship. It was on account of you."

"Me? I was awfully sorry. I could do no more than I did. And what I did appeared to make mischief."

"Good mischief for me. That diamond chap found me out and helped me off—see? Well, this beats all. And how did you meet Dave Robey?"

Mark told his story again.

"And you hit that Brent on the jaw?"

"Of course. What else could I do?"

"Cut and run," said Amos. "And so Dave glued on to you? He's a oner himself with his fists. He's a good chap, but he keeps to himself."

"I like him already. What is he?"

"A 'karwyer'—wagon-driver. Some day, when I get enough money, I will buy a wagon, and trek out into nowhere, where I can get lost for a year."

"Will you now?"

"Ja. I will fill up with Kaffir stores, and trek away up yonder." He drawled out the "yonder," conveying the idea of distance by lengthening the word.

The oxen were swinging along. David was silent once more after his brief spasm of eloquence; and the faint murmur of the sea came drowsily on the soft air.

"I did see your uncle," said Mark.

"So?"

This word, as used by Amos, expressed a variety of meanings. In this case, it meant that he was waiting to hear more.

"There was something queer about the diamonds. You remember you told me how your uncle did make his money. By-the-by, he gave me this stick." And Mark held up the old battle-axe.

"I been wondering why he gave you that stick. It b'longed to my father."

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"Did it?" said Mark, slowly. "Well, then, you'd better keep it."

"Not me. Why did he give it?"

"I have no idea. It came by post; and he was the very last person I expected a present from, because I had made him very angry. I asked him what had become of the big diamond, and it seemed to shake him up. Afterwards he changed, and I understood that he meant to do something for you."

"It was the best thing you did. See here. Your story put my uncle on my track; and that other chap, after what you told him, were keeping watch on my uncle. So when I heard my uncle at the door, arsting for me, and I made a bolt, that chap saw me clear over the garden wall. He had me into a cab before I knew what had happened. He took me to his house, turned me inside out, and shipped me by the mail-boat nex' day. I'm partners with Goodchild." Amos said this with great solemnity. "Yes, we're going shares, him and me; and he's paid me something on account. I've got my belt stuffed." And he patted his waist.

Mark was boiling with excitement. The mystery of the diamonds once more appealed to him with full power, he wanted very much to get at the inner meaning. As Amos stopped, he put a blunt question—

"What does Mr. Goodchild want you to do?"

"That's telling."

"Oh, very well," said Mark.

"Maybe I would tell you if there wasn't such a lot to it; but I tell you this is for a man." And the speaker tried to look very important.

"Pretty sort of man you are!" said Mark.

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"If I thought," said Amos, with a side-glance, "that you wouldn't split—not even if they were going to hammer you with a sjambok—maybe I'd tell you."

Mark did not condescend to reply.

"Well"—Amos looked all around him; then, sinking his voice to a whisper, "I've got to find out where those diamonds came from. Other people have tried; but Goodchild thinks that if anybody can find the place it's Si Amos, son of old Amos, who was the man to first find the diamonds."

"Why does he think so?" asked Mark, with growing interest.

"I'll tell you. It's because I know."

"Because you know?"

"That's it. I told you about the old black fellow who brought me my father's skin sack with that diamond-shell in it? Well, that old Kaffir is dead. When he were sick he called me to him. 'Congela quedin'—which means 'look here, boy,'—he says, 'here is a river, a big river'—and he draws a wavy line in the sand—'ke-ke-lo-ko-ke'—which means nix, 'here is by the river a great hill,'—and there he puts a white pebble, 'you may know this hill by the single tree on its summit. Congela. One sun from the hill the great river goes down over a krantz with a great noise. Congela quedin, it was there that your father searched for what he found.' So! what did my father find?"

"The diamonds," said Mark, eagerly.

"Eweh! He found the diamonds."

"Did you tell Mr. Goodchild all this?"

"Am I a baby?" said Amos, with a snort.

"You didn't tell him, then?"

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"I told him jest enough, and no more."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Mark, warmly.

"Oh, I ain't making no boots before I get the hide," said Amos, "and I begin to sniff danger already. You know those two skepsels you met? Well, who do you think they are?"

"Wicks and Brent? Who are they?"

"I'll tell you. They work for my uncle—that's what. And what I want to find out is—Did my uncle know I was coming? and if so, did he set them to watch you, thinkin' that I would find you out?—or thinkin', maybe, that you were working for Goodchild to find out this diamond-mine."

"Perhaps they only met me by chance."

"I ain't takin' any chances—not me; and there's one thing I'm going to find out to-night, and that is whether they are follerin' us. Now, I guess we'll go and sit on the wagon-box along with Dave."

They jumped out, and, walking beside the wagon until the oxen were stopped, they mounted to the box. The wagon had crossed the bridge over the Zwartkops river, and the oxen were going soft-footed over a sandy road, which presently mounted a gentle slope that led through a fringe of the Addo Bush, stretching away for miles to the west, the home still of a few herds of wild elephants. At the top of the hill the oxen had a five minutes' rest, and then the wagon crept down the opposite slope, while David called to his team a continual refrain of "honnnow-whoa!" After about another hour's trek, the leaders, under the guidance of the little black boy, left the road, and the wagon came to a halt beside a cluster of trees. The oxen were outspanned and fastened by the rheims to

the trek-touw, while the small boy collected dry wood. The fire was soon alight, the kettle placed to windward, and the party sat around, the little Kaffir a few feet away, showing his white teeth and large gleaming eyes.

Mark did not speak. The scene was so novel, so altogether different from what he had experienced, with the profound silence, the intense black of the shadows, and the slight noises made by the resting oxen. Fire-flies came and went in a mazy dance, or remained fixed on some branch in the deeper shadows, looking to him like the eyes of some wild animal. Presently, as he sipped his coffee and cut the charred meat from a mutton-bone grilled on the live coals, using a large slice of bread as a plate, he detected through the stillness a multitude of voices which at first his ear had not caught—the harsh cry of the goat-sucker hawking along the road, the whistle of a plover flying high, the shrill drumming of the mole-cricket, and a number of soft whisperings that he could not locate, coming on the night wind which rustled away over the trees. It was his first night in his new home, and it made a deep impression on him, for the charm of the land is in its nights and early mornings—in the nights because of the scope that is given to the imagination to weave the mysterious out of the brooding stillness; in the mornings because of the freshness of the air and the glory of the dawn.

Mark was a little saddened by the nature of his new surroundings, but the others seemed also impressed. Dave Robey sat staring into the embers; and Amos, sitting deep in the shadow, with his back against the wagon-wheel, stared into the darkness; while the Kaffir boy curled himself up in his blanket, with his head completely

covered. Presently Robey rose up, yawned, fetched a blanket from the wagon, and stretched himself by the fire. Then the two friends climbed into the tent, and Mark was soon in the land of dreams—a country inhabited solely by Bill Brent, Sam Wicks, and Mr. Futter, who appeared more frequently than otherwise as a rhinoceros' horn stick. Then he was once more aboard the steamer in a choppy sea that sent him rocking in his berth. One sickening heave, followed by a wild roll, woke him up. He was afloat in pitch darkness, and from the groans and creaks he found the ship was going to pieces. He stood up and something banged him on the head: it was the lantern, and the blow enabled him to fetch his compass. The wagon was moving at a good rate, and apparently moving over a ploughed field or down a flight of steps. Amos was not in his place—and, groping his way to the canvas screen, he pushed it aside and peered out. The road behind stretched away in a whitish stretch between the dim outlines of bush and trees, and in the sky was a deepening flush of pink. The air was delightfully fresh and soft, and slipping into his flannels, he was soon out. Running forward, he saw the outline of Robey on the box seat, with the glow of his pipe reflected in his solemn eyes.

“Where is Amos?”

“For'ento.”

“Where?”

Robey pointed ahead, and Mark walked briskly on past the oxen, who jibbed at his presence. Soon he outpaced the span, whose morning gait is always the quickest, and saw a shadow moving along close against the bushes. He stole up softly behind, to give his friend a surprise, but when he came to the spot where he had last seen

the figure there was no one there, and as he stood gazing around, his hat was banged down over his eyes.

"Thought you were going to give me a schreik—eh?"

"Why didn't you wake me? and what are you doing with that gun?"

"Just the time for hares and pheasants, or maybe a bush-buck, waiting for the warm of the sun before going to his form."

"Shall I go back for my gun?"

"I wish you would go back, and stay there."

"I don't see much fun in that."

"Look here, Clinton, I passed those two tramps over yonder, and maybe they're following us. If you like to take the gun, I'll go back to the wagon, for one of us must be there in case they tried to steal something."

Mark went back, and, taking his gun out, walked behind the wagon. It was hard luck, for he heard Amos shoot twice, and nothing came his way—not even one of the tramps. Presently, however, the oxen pulled up, and Amos appeared with a hare and a couple of red-shanked francolins, which he called "pheasants."

"There's our breakfast and dinner," he said. "Now, you just go on in front, and I'll keep watch here. Keep close up alongside the bush, and remember, if you don't see the game first, then you'll see nothing. Look out for outspans."

Mark went on a couple of hundred yards ahead of the wagon, and then crouched along, with his neck stretched and his nerves on the jump. He saw nothing at all for a long time, and yet after he had passed the little clearings a small dark object, that he thought was a lump of grass, sat up, cocked a pair of long ears, and began to nibble at

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the grass. Where the bush at another place made a wide sweep back from the road, he thought he saw something run, but he did not see it again. Yet five minutes later there was a report behind, and when the wagon overtook him—the sun having blazed out—Amos had another francolin.

“Shot him at the outspan.”

“I saw no outspan,” said Mark, disgusted.

“So? Well, better luck next time. You’ve got to get the bush eye, and the bush nose, and the snake jump.”

“What’s the snake jump?”

“See that stick on the road?” said Amos, suddenly.

“Over there? Yes. What then?”

“It’s a sure enuff stick?”

“Of course.”

“Pick it up for me, will you.”

Mark took a step forward, and then jumped back, for the stick had suddenly let out a thrilling hiss and disappeared into the grass.

“That’s the snake jump,” said Amos, calmly; “and next time, and ever after, when you come sudden on a stick, or a shadder, or a rope, or a snake, you’ll step high, before you know why. Funny, ain’t it?”

“Funny!” said Mark, in disgust. “It was a mean trick to play.”

“Wern’t me. It were the snake. I say it’s real funny. Maybe you never yeard a snake hiss before, yet the first time you jump like a buck that smells a man’s spoor.”

“Where’s the snake now?” and Mark cocked the gun.

“Don’t you worry. There’s heaps more about; but you’ve got to look for ’em. They won’t hurt you unless

you tramp on 'em, for you ain't no use to them as food.
Well, step lively: this is a long skoff."

"I wish you would talk English."

"Ain't that English? I said a long 'skoff:' well, that's
English for a long trek. Right up till ten o'clock, when
Dave will outspan until the cool of the evening."

CHAPTER VI

THE BABOON AND THE TIGER

They outspanned this time on a flat with round clusters of bush over it, and a forest bordering its western rim, and rounded hills on the north dented by shallow valleys. At the top of each such valley was a white farm-house flanked by tall gum trees, and Clinton rather wondered at the smallness of the house as contrasted with an acreage which in England would have set off a manor. He was a little dissatisfied, too, with the appearance of the country. He had read of tropical scenery, with its luxurious vegetation, its palms, its birds of brilliant plumage, and its monkeys. There were no monkeys, there were no palms, there was no luxuriousness, merely a sober expanse of greyish grass, clusters of dark-looking bush, and a seemingly unending stretch of drab forest. He did not even like the trees. They seemed to him small and ragged—the poor relatives of the oak, the elm, and the beech. He disliked the flies, he was fastidious about the little red ants which persisted in getting into his cup and on his bread, and he strongly objected to the injury inflicted on his skin by some mysterious agency. There were several little lumps on his skin, which grew in irritation the more he rubbed.

“Hang it!” he groaned. “I’m all on fire!”

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"Ticks," said Robey, removing his pipe.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ja," said Dave, and Mark carried his bumps to be inspected by Amos, who was playing "Home, sweet Home" on a mouth-organ.

Amos squinted at the inflamed patches, and grunted "Vaseline," whereupon Mark capsized him and then sat on him.

"If you don't stop making this row, and tell me what has bitten me, I'll make you swallow this music, box and all."

Amos struggled for five minutes, then gave up.

"They're tick-bites; that's what."

"Where's the tick?"

"See that little black speck on each pimple? Well, that's it. Don't snip it off. If you do, the head will be left in to fester. Smear vaseline over, or candle or wagon grease."

"Ugh! Are there many ticks?"

"Millions. From the size of a pin-head to the size of a sixpence; blue ticks, black ticks, red ticks, bonte ticks, hard ticks, and soft ticks."

"What a country!"

"Oh, that's nothing. When they're used to you, you'll get used to them. Jes now you're young and tender an' fresh, and they like you."

"Don't they bite you?"

"Sometimes, by mistake, and then they are sorry for it. I tell you there's lots of queer things about. Ever see a paper house made by insects?"

"No," said Mark, suspiciously.

"Well. See that thorn tree over there with the big

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white thorns on, and a thing like a basin upside down. That's a paper house, with separate rooms in it, all made by little insects. That's so."

Mark regarded Amos with a critical eye, but was met with an innocent smile, and presently, after he had anointed the tick-bites with vaseline, went off to inspect. Certainly the object on the tree looked as if it had been made of brown paper. It was as large round as a basin, and had many inlets from below. He tiptoed, cut the stem through, and the "house" fell with a thud. A moment later Mark was sprinting across the flat with a swarm of wasps in full pursuit, and as he ran he beat the air frantically, finally bundling head first into a "vlei," or shallow basin of water, which was his salvation. The wasps, annoyed by the sudden disappearance of their victim, turned their attention to the wagon, and when Mark emerged, dripping, he had the satisfaction of seeing Amos in full retreat half a mile off, while Robey was standing in the smoke from the fire.

"I think we'll cry quits," said Clinton an hour later, when the wasps had returned to their ruined home, and Amos reappeared with a swollen ear. "If I hadn't come across the water I should have been badly stung. That's the second trick you've played on me to-day."

"I were just teachin' you; that's all. You've got to look at things before you touch 'em—see? A chap who'd cut loose a wasp's nest ain't got sense enough to leave a rotted stump alone."

"What's wrong with a rotten stump?"

"Scorpions mostly, sometimes centipedes, and now and again snakes. The baboon, he knows that much. When a baboon sees a hollow branch on the ground, he

hangs down from the tree and moves it. If a snake comes slithering out, he swings up; if a scorpion, he grabs it between the head and the curl of the tail, and eats it. That's why there's no sense in the yarn that a man was once a monkey, or a monkey were a man. No man would ever catch hold of a live scorpion and eat it."

"I should think not."

"Mind you, I ain't saying scorpions is not good; but so long as they carry a poison-sack in the end of the tail under a fish-hook arrangement, why, I'm not having 'em for dinner. Yes, that's so. The baboon he knows a hollow tree is a pantry, and the rock-snake he knows what's in the baboon's mind. That's where the tiger came to sorrow and a early grave."

"How was that?" said Mark, spreading his wet clothes on the wagon to dry.

"This yer rock-snake lived in a krantz, and he ate fat young baboons and dassies (conies) till the baboons went down inter the woods under the krantz, and slep in the trees, eating Kaffir plums and draag-mij-kels."

"What?"

"Dry-my-throats—blue-black berries that make your throat dry. Well, the baboons they went down inter the wood, and the dassies they trekked for another krantz. The rock-snake he stopped up where he were because of the warm rocks, and 'cos he were too lazy to move. He jes stretched hisself in the sun and waited.

"'By'mby,' he ses, 'the baboons will come back,' and so he waited and grew thinner an' thinner, and gettin' savager an' savager. After a time a tiger found out the baboons, and he lived on them. Then the ole man baboon climbed up to the top of a yellow-wood, and did a big think. He

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sat there, maybe, two days. I can't say 'xactly if it were more or a little less, but when his thinkin' were over he climbed up to the krantz, and were goin' up to the ledge high up, where he used to play as a boy, when he seen that what he took for the old monkey touw, that served as a ladder in the happy times, were the rock-snake hisself, purtendin' to be somethin' which he weren't. He trembled all over, and went a way off, with one hand on a bough.

" 'Mornin', baas,' he ses.

" 'I ain't yearing,' ses the rock-snake. 'Come nearer,' and he gathered hisself up, measurin' the distance 'tween him and the ole man baboon. The ole man baboon grinned a sick grin. 'Cos if the snake were deaf, how did he year him ?

" 'Is dis near enuff,' he ses, climbin' up hand over fist, till he were above the snake's head.

" 'I can't see,' ses the snake, beginnin' to swing ; 'where are you ?'

" 'The ole man baboon grinned another sick grin, 'cos the snake's eye were on him all the time, sending cold chills up an' down his back.

" 'There's some one after you, baas,' he ses ; 'he's gwine to break your back and eat you, beginning at the tail end.'

" 'The rock-snake he let out at the baboon like a streak o' light from a bull's-eye lamp, and if the baboon hadn't 'a jumped, he'd 'a been caught.

" 'Why do yer run ?' ses the snake ses he, in a sof' whisper. 'I were only playin'.'

" 'I ain't here for play, I'm here to warn you, baas. We've lost a good many of our people. Been taken by the tiger.'

“‘So I’ve yeard,’ said the snake, darting out his tongue and looking fierce.

“‘Well, baas,’ he ses, ‘the tiger ses he’s getting tired of baboon, and he’s going to eat you for a change; that’s what.’

“‘You can tell him,’ ses the snake, with a cold smile, ‘that I’m at home to visitors all day.’

“‘How am I gwine to tell him that? If I got near enuff to tell him, he’ll be near enuff to catch me; an’ maybe he won’t come for a week,’ and the baboon grinned to hisself, for the snake were that thin his skin were in folds.

“‘The tiger he says that you’re all covered with moss, like a ole stump; and that he’s a good mind to feed you up before he eats you.’

“‘The snake he shut his mouth and sed nothin’.

“‘The tiger drinks at a pool down below every day at the same time,’ ses the baboon, scratchin’ his head.

“‘The snake he kep’ his mouth shut.

“‘There’s a ole stump near the pool lying among the dead leaves,’ ses the baboon. ‘The tiger, he allus steps over the stump.’

“‘The snake darted out his tongue with a hiss.

“‘I were jus’ thinkin’, baas, that if you crep’ in among the leaves you could see the tiger, an’ if he were too big, you could run away to another kloof.’

“‘The snake let go a hiss that made the baboon jump five feet. ‘Where is the pool?’ he ses.

“‘If the baas will climb down the krantz, an’ follow the stream down to a pool with a rim of white sand, he will see the dead leaves. The tiger drinks one hour before sun under.’

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“‘I will go down,’ said the snake, softly, ‘and if he is very big I will go away. I’ve got cramp in the tail, and would be obliged,’ he ses, ‘if you’d loose it from the tree up there.’

“‘If you’ve got the cramp,’ ses the baboon, with another grin, ‘it’s no use your gwine to the pool. Better give it up;’ and he made tracks, then came back by another way, and see the snake slidin’ off for the pool, ’s if his joints were greased. Then the ole man baboon he swung hisself through the tree till he come to a big yellow-wood, and then he stopped and looked about. After a time he climbed up to the top and looked down. There were the tiger asleep on a branch, stretched out full length.

“‘Baugh!’ he ses, and the tiger opens one eye.

“‘Mornin’, great one,’ he ses.

“‘Gurr,’ ses the tiger, lookin’ up and switchin’ his tail.

“‘I got some news,’ ses the ole baboon.

“The tiger he yawns, an’ the baboon had to hold on to keep from fallin’ into his jaws.

“‘The big snake up in the krantz ses you’ve got no right in this kloof, an’ if you don’t run outer it quicker’n you come in, he ses he’ll squeeze you flatter’n his last year’s skin.’

“The tiger he flattened his ears an’ switched his tail.

“‘That’s what,’ ses the baboon ses he. ‘And seein’ as how we’d rather have you in the trees than that twenty foot o’ swallow, that can’t be told from a branch, why, I come to give you warnin’. We thought that, maybe, if you could find him asleep, you might—we dunno ’bout that,—but you might get the better o’ him.’

“‘Look here,’ ses the tiger, takin’ notice, ‘don’t interfere with gentlemen, or you may get hurt.’

“‘Yes, great spotted one,’ ses the baboon. ‘I will go,’ and he begun to swing.

“‘Where did you say the snake was?’ ses the tiger, with a yawn.

“‘He’s waiting for you at the drinking-pool, great whiskers. He’s asleep now, stretched out like a shadder in the water, with his head among the ferns. He expects you at sundown. An’ when you dip your tongue in, he’ll catch hole. Maybe you’d better shift.’

“‘Get out,’ ses the tiger, springin’ up; and the ole baboon he made tracks back to the pool, where he hides himself among the branches. The rock-snake were there already. Part of his body were lyin’ longside the ole stump, and the other parts were covered with leaves, all ’cept the head, which were in the shadders and uplifted.

“By’mby here comes the tiger, goin’ soft-footed and creepin’ from one tree to the other. Near he came an’ nearer, till he were on the edge of the clearing where the snake stretched, with the pool beyond. Then he stood with a wrinkle between his eyes, staring; then he reached out a paw, sinking low, and crep’ forward, till he got one foot over the two stumps, the dead stump and the live.”

“He stood over the two stumps?” said Dave, forgetting to smoke.

“Ja! He got his foot over, and he stared an’ stared at the pool which were in the shadder, with spots of light comin’ and goin’ as the sun fell through the trees. His tail switched the leaves, and each time there was a rustle the snake’s head came nearer. The snake’s head were

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raised about three feet, the neck arched like a bar of blue steel, with the loose skin under and thickening out where the sinews and muscles rippled under the skin in a way to make your flesh creep. The ole baboon he shivered an' shook. To see the tiger standin' still as death ready to spring, and the snake with his tongue flickering outer his shut jaws coming nearer an' nearer 'thout seemin' to move. Then the tiger lifted his head an' sniffed, then he stared behine him; then of a sudden, with a jerk, he looked sideways, and see the snake's head 'bout two feet away. At that they both hissed; they both opened their mouths and hissed, and it were hard to tell that the tiger weren't a snake too, from the way he flattened his head. Then the tiger sprung forward."

"The tiger sprang forward?" said Dave.

"He sprung, but as he jumped the snake whipped up his tail, and the tiger were pulled down 's if a rope were tied to him, and he were anchored. As he fell the snake darted his head and there was a whirlwind. The water flew, and the sand flew, and the leaves an' twigs an' stones they went scatter. The ole baboon he jumped up an' down on the branch, shouting 'Baugh! baugh! baugh-un!' he shouted, an' the tiger he kep' his mouth shut; but the snake hissed like a railway engine in a dark hole. The tiger he got his behine claws inter a coil of the snake, and then he ripped. He ripped, an' the two lay still in a heap. The ole baboon he came down near. The snake were all blood an' tatters, an' the tiger were blinking his eyes, with his tongue out, all swollen. The snake writhed with his head from the pain, and then, in a blind rage, he went hammer, hammer, kerwelt—three times battering against the tiger's head. The last time the tiger

he spread his jaws, and the snake's head were fast. There was a crunch. The baboon he sprung away.

"'The ole thief of the krantz is dead,' he ses. But he see he were wrong. There were three coils round the tiger's body, and they begun to move, showing raw an' red. Then there was a crack, and the tiger groaned. He groaned, an' then he hooked his great claws into a root, and pulled himself into the water."

"He pulled himself into the water?"

"And the water was red. The ole baboon he see the end of the snake's tail sticking out, and he grabbed hold; but the end coiled round his arm and let go, so 's he had a fit from fright. When he woke up it was night, an' the water was moving still. So he scooted up the tree. In the morning he see's they were dead. So he unloosed them, and stretched them out.

"Then he gave the call, an' the baboons they come from every hill-side.

"'Our enemies are dead,' he sed, moving his eyebrows.

"An' the baboons they looked, hanging on the branches.

"'The spotted one killed the great evil,' he ses, 'and the evil one killed the great thief. And, he ses, 'I've killed them both.'

"'Baugh!' ses the baboons.

"'Therefore,' he ses, 'I am the baas of the kloof and the krantz, and you will keep me in mealies an' beetles.'

"So," said Amos, "that is how the tiger came to grief over a dead stump."

"Where did you hear that story?" asked Mark.

"Oh, away in the woods," said Amos. "I yeard a

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many yarns in the woods when I been alone for days an' days, hunting for wild honey."

"Tell us another," said Dave, picking up a coal for his pipe.

"Better call the oxen in," said Amos. "Time to trek."

Three sounding cracks from the whip brought the oxen in from the grazing, with full stomachs, and once again they resumed their journey, going through a country of gentle ups and downs, with clusters of bush on the flats, and the valleys thickly wooded. It was said, by a very inferior person, that South Africa is a land where the "rivers are without water," the "birds without song," the "flowers without scent," the "women without beauty," and the "men without honour." Other people have repeated the same parrot-cry, though perhaps the evening flower, the "avond bloom," has been scenting the air with such a sweet fragrance as few flowers possess, under their very noses; though the black-cap has been tuning up on the mimosa, or the green canary trilling from the pine; though a blue-eyed maid, radiant of the soil, has been charming their eyes; and the thunder of a river in flood is in their ears. The land is a land of flowers with both beauty and fragrance, of birds with gay plumage and musical notes, of women with beauty, of men with honour, and rivers with water; but, with a waywardness that sometimes overtakes the passing traveller, and fills him up with the evidence of everything that is despairing, the land puts on a hue of drab. Where the gladioli marched over whole hill-sides, flushing them pink; where the white heath and the cup-like arum lilies made paths of snowy whiteness; where the golden crocuses carpeted the

slopes, there is nothing but the brown of sun-baked ground. In place of the soft notes of the songsters there comes the harsh scream of the eagle, the hoarse laugh of the laurie, and the melancholy boom of the black locust-eater. Instead of the yellow floods of waters there is the yellow sand in the river-beds; and the ochred face of a black woman bursts on the scared vision of a searcher after beauty; while, perhaps, some indolent mean white, who is too tired to stand up, gets the better of the smart traveller in a horse-deal.

The rivers were a source of friction between Mark and Amos. They crossed the Sundays River over a bridge of portentous dimensions when compared with the muddy trickle far beneath, and Mark scoffed—

“Call that a river?” he said scornfully. “Why, it’s nothing but a ditch.”

They passed over the Bushman’s River, splashing through a drift; and Mark said it was an insult to have to take off one’s boots to wade through such a little puddle; and when he was told that they were about to cross the Kareiga, he looked around him with offensive surprise.

“Did you say a river?” he said. “You don’t surely mean that streak of wet?”

“Yes, I do.”

“It looks very tired. I don’t think it can crawl down to the sea. If it met a crab-hole, it would be lost, don’t you think?”

“Bet you won’t swim across the mouth.”

“Pooh! I’d jump across.”

“I say, Dave, where do you outspan?”

“De kant de rand” (This side the ridge).

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"This side the rand—eh? 'Bout half an hour—eh? All right. Bring your gun, clever. We'll go down to the mouth, sleep on the sand, and be back in the morn. You'll wait for us, Dave?"

"Ja," said Dave; and the two, with their guns, a kettle, some coffee, sugar, and a loaf of bread, went off.

They did not follow the river-banks, for a wood came down to the water; but they went along a little-used wagon-track that led them through a park-like country, with wide open glades and dense wood—the sort of country that is the same eastwards along the coast for four or five hundred miles; a country full of charm to the sportsman, the naturalist, and the human boy; for it abounds in wild nooks, in wild game, and in bird-life. Very soon the roar and crash of the breakers warned them that they were approaching the sea, but between them and the beach was a hill, made by the piling up of sand. This sand-hill, broken at intervals, runs east right round the coast, and the process of its making was very clear. At first the sand-dunes; then the thick grass with telescopic joints; then the creepers living on air; then fleshy-leaved scrub; then the shrope trees springing from seeds dropped by birds; then the bush;—and the hill is made. As they drew nearer the sea, the bush closed in on them, dark and thick, with a narrow track through. So Mark did not see the river again until he parted the bushes and stood on its brink.

"By Jove!" he said.

"You ain't swimmin'—eh?" said Amos, with a grin.

The river was no trickle now. It was two hundred yards across to the wood on the further side; and the

waters that the mother sea had poured in on the tide were singing out with a merry hum. A wisp of curlew were flying up stream, and a couple of black oyster-catchers were whistling from the white strip of beach seawards, where the waves curled majestically and sent the seething banks of foam racing to the sand.

The river narrowed to a neck about twenty feet wide, where it cut through the beach in its last rush for the sea.

"Give it up," said Amos.

Mark said nothing, but stripped.

"I'll wait for you over there," said Amos, pointing to the spot where the river entered the sea.

Mark waded in, and the water took him up to the armpits, making him gasp. Then he struck out, and was whipped round by a whirlpool.

"Guess you can come out," said Amos. "We'll call the bet off."

Mark answered with a dive, and reappeared beyond the eddie. He waved a hand, and then struck out, swimming strong; and Amos made off across the sand, to wait on the beach where the river entered the sea, making sure that Mark would be swept out by the current. So certain was he of this that he took off his boots and socks, rolled up his trousers, and waded in with a long pole of driftwood. In the mean while Mark was getting on fairly well, using the breast-stroke, and shaping his course a little up-stream to escape the rush of waters into the narrow channel across the two hundred yards of beach. He fixed his eyes on a white stump on the further shore, and was enjoying the battle very much, with the whole river to himself, and no one within sight but Amos outlined against the white of the surf. He changed

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from breast to side stroke, and saw a globe all aglow within a few yards, bearing slowly down upon him, like a fire-ship of old; another stroke, and it was a dome of opal; another, and the strange thing was a glorious mixture of purple and pink, with a touch of smouldering red. Behind it came floating another stately iridescent marvel; and behind that yet a third, flashing under the level rays of the descending sun. What on earth were they? He pulled round, and the first went floating by, now quite transparent, with long tendrils beneath sweeping the waters. Jelly-fish—big beyond all experience, but jelly-fish; and with a grunt, Mark swung round, then uttered a yell as a stinging hot mustard plaster affixed itself to his ribs. With a frantic plunge he dislodged the innocent-looking mass of jelly and snorted on his way, with a feeling of growing discomfort and suspicion. His side was tingling, and he turned over on his back to float, while he felt his ribs. Then he swept the spray from his eyes, and paused a moment to stare up at the dark blue of the sky; and as he looked, there swept across the vault a great bird with black wings spread, a white head thrust down, and feet curled up. It swept round, steering with fan-like tail, swooped near, till he could see the curved beak, the hooked claws, and the bold, bright eyes. With a shrill scream the bird sloped up, swept round, hovered right above him, and then rushed down. Between its start and the finish there were but a few seconds, and Mark was too surprised to move. As the winged thunderbolt approached, its feet, feathered to the end, shot out, the curved claws looking like grappling-irons; and with a tremendous splash it struck the water; then it screamed, and with a few beats of its mighty wings, struggled away,

and rose slowly on a gentle incline, with something wriggling.

Mark took a long breath. "By Jove!" he muttered; then turned on his breast and began to swim frantically. Before he had recovered his nerve, he found himself travelling at great speed right out to sea between narrow banks of sand, from which fragments splashed into the channel at every second. Right ahead were the rushing banks of foam, and, beyond, the arch of the huge outermost breaker appearing in size like a hill of water.

"Halloa! halloa! Clinton! Clin—ton!"

The swimmer gave a strangled gasp; and then he saw the figure of Amos loom into view—a little frail pigmy against the fury of the surf.

"Catch hole of this stick! Do you hear? Catch hole!"

Mark threw himself on a dark object just ahead, caught it and held on. There was a tug and a splatter, drowned in the mighty smash of a breaking wave. He was pulled up, then swept on, then pulled up, then lifted, rolled over and over, dragged back, and then caught again. He was dimly conscious of some one shouting in his ears, blundered on without knowing where, and then collapsed. After gasping for a few moments, he struggled to his feet, and began to lurch.

"Where are you going now?"

Mark pulled up, rubbed the wet from his eyes, and stared at the waves, which seemed to him to be coming swiftly after him.

"You sit down."

Mark sat down on the sand and looked at Amos, who was running with water.



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"MARK THREW HIMSELF ON A DARK OBJECT JUST AHEAD"



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"You're wet," he said.

"So's the water," said Amos. "The jerk dragged me off my feet, and we had a reg'lar rough-an'-tumble. I thought we were gone, and then a wave tossed us back."

"If it had not been for you——" began Mark.

"You wouldn't have made that fool-swim. That's enuff. What you think of the river now—eh?"

"It was awfully good of you!" said Mark, with chattering teeth.

"Look here." Amos got out of his drenched clothing. "Just you get up and collect dry wood, while I take these things up under the trees. Come along, else you'll shake your teeth out."

Mark rose, took a long look at the breakers, then staggered after Amos, who, with a big armful, led the way. In a little time a cheerful fire was ablaze under the trees; the kettle, filled from a fresh-water hole above high-tide mark, was put on, and Mark got into his clothes, while those of Amos were spread to dry. The hot coffee warmed them up, and in a few minutes they felt better.

"Now, I tell you what," said Amos. "We'll build another fire in a hollow of a sand-hill, and sleep on the sand. It's soft and warm."

Very soon they were stretched out in a sheltered hollow between two white sand-dunes, and, with the magnificent music of the waves in their ears, dropped into a profound sleep.

CHAPTER VII

A BIT OF SPOORING

At break of day they were awake, ate a mouthful of bread, started a fire, put on the kettle, and sprinted across the sand for a tumble in the waves. Refreshed, they ran a race along the beach where it had been beaten hard and smooth by the tide, and then returned to the fire.

"What's that red spot on your side, Clinton?"

Mark related the incident of the jelly-fish, and the swoop of the black sea eagle.

"There's the same chap sitting on that dry tree. I'll have a shot at him. Why. Where is my gun? You did not leave them in the bush last night, did you?"

"Course not. They're behind you in that bush."

"Excuse me, they're not."

Amos lazily stood up, but one glance was enough. "By hookey!" he cried, "some one's jumped 'em! They're clean gone!"

"What?" shouted Mark.

"Sit still, man. Don't move."

Mark sat still and looked at Amos, while the latter stood with his hands in his pockets, and his eyes fixed on the sand along which they slowly travelled. Then he looked at Mark reflectively, without any trace of excitement.

A Bit of Spooring

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"Can you make your way back to the wagon by yourself?"

"I dare say; but why?"

"'Cos I'm goin' after my gun. I never had a gun to myself before, an' I'm not goin' to lose this, if it takes me a month to find it."

He put on his coat, and ran his eye up the sand-dune again, then along the beach.

"Are you going after the thieves?"

Amos nodded.

"I will go with you."

"Best not. You'd be in the way. Maybe your best way would be to cross the river higher up, and follow along its bank till you struck the road, then pick up the wagon spoor and follow it—see?"

"No, I don't. I'm going with you."

Amos rubbed his smooth chin gravely. "Well, come," he said; "but if you don't keep behine, and do just what I say, I'll give you the slip—see? This tracking ain't in your line yet."

"Go ahead," said Mark; but Amos walked towards the sea. "Why, they did not go that way. There are the tracks in the sand leading up."

"Look here," said Amos, "who's to know those chaps ain't watching us? How long were we bathing?"

"About half-an-hour."

"Well, just throw at that sandpiper with a stone. It will look careless. Maybe they followed us down here yesterday; maybe they just chanced on us. Anyhow, they ain't had breakfast—see? Well, they'll lie up along the hill, watching to see if we follow; then they'll shift inter the wood a mile or so, and stop for breakfast

—see? All right. Now, which way will they go? Don't look back—look at the sea."

Mark stared vaguely at the breakers. "How do I know which way they will go?"

"What would you ha' done if you took the guns?"

"I would not have taken them."

"Oh! yah! Well, I'd 'a gone over towards the Bushman's River two miles; walked in the water to hide the spoor, then crossed over, walked in the water and climbed out through the bush. But maybe these fellows are too lazy or too hungry—see?"

"What I do see is, that if you stand jawing all the day, we won't see our guns again."

"All right; come along."

Amos meandered up the beach away from their sleeping-place, came to the channel, then leisurely followed its course to the river, and presently reached the spot beneath the trees, where they had made the first fire.

"Been here," he said, looking about.

"Where?" asked Mark in a whisper.

Amos picked up a bit of burnt stick. "Chap picked that up, lit his pipe, and threw it down. They slept by the fire—after they seen where we slept—and this morning they edged up to the right."

Clinton stared at each place Amos pointed out, but could read no signs. The Colonial boy, however, appeared to have no doubts. He slipped through the trees, with his sharp eyes on the ground, and, after a few minutes, pointed silently to the soft sandy black soil, on which this time Mark made out the print of a heel. Amos went on steadily, never getting 'hooked up'; and about two

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hundred yards further on went out on to the crest of the sand-hill overlooking the sea.

"I was right," he whispered. "They came here to watch us, and now we've got to look out. You'd better keep 'bout fifty yards behine, and when I see them I'll come back—see?"

Mark nodded, and Amos drew ahead into the thick, silent wood, putting each foot down softly in its turn, and pausing at intervals to glance ahead. Mark, coming behind at the interval stipulated, kept his eyes glued on the other's bent back, with occasional puzzled glances at the ground, which was to him a sealed book. He had all the excitement of the chase without any of the knowledge. By-and-by, as the sun rose, the air grew warm, and the perspiration trickled over his face; but still the crouching figure ahead went on with the same caution and the same deadly slowness. They had been, perhaps, an hour, and had covered not more than half a mile, when a muffled report broke the silence, and gave him some relief. Amos sat down on a fallen tree.

"Did you hear that shot?" asked Mark, wiping his face.

"We'll just sit here an' give 'em ten minutes to start the fire. One of 'em's shot somethin'—maybe a blue buck, maybe a wood-pigeon. Well, they'll cook him an' eat him."

"That's very fine; but suppose they missed?"

"They wouldn't fire to miss. They ain't shootin' for fun, but for the pot."

"How do you manage to track them?"

"Easy 'nuff," said Amos. "They're just goin' anyhow. Think we're a couple of dunderheads; maybe,

think we'd be too scared to follow. I hope they shot a blue buck."

"I don't see that it matters what they shot."

"Ghoisters! don't it? A blue buck 'll give 'em a square feed, and maybe make 'em ready for a sleep in the warm."

"I wouldn't have thought of that."

"Some day," said Amos, gravely, "if you don't die of old age, you'll learn something. Steady, now!"

"All right," said Mark, dropping a ready fist. "I'll pay you out for that."

They sat on the log—at least, Amos did—for Clinton was too excited to sit until the ten minutes had gone; then in the same order the tracking was continued, if possible, with more caution than before. At last, much to Mark's surprise, they stepped out on to the banks of another river, broader than the one they had left, but hemmed in, as the other, by walls of bush.

"Bushman's River," said Amos.

"But where are the men?"

Amos pointed up, and Clinton gazed into the blue, cricking his neck.

"Smoke!" said Amos. "They don't know enuff to use dry wood."

They crawled out under a heap of driftwood, and saw two men, about a quarter of a mile up stream, sitting down at a fire, with the sun gleaming on the barrels of two guns—the stolen guns.

"What I tell you?" said Amos. "They're roastin' meat. By an' by they'll go to sleep, and we'll get the guns as easy as easy."

Things did not, however, turn out just so. There

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was a party camping out on the other side, and, having finished their breakfast at their camp in the woods, trooped out to the river's bank for the morning's fun. There were ladies in the party, and their song came ringing over, causing the boys to glance across with a feeling of resentment to think that other people should have dared to venture into this lonely retreat. When they glanced up stream again, they saw that the two thieves had risen to their feet.

"By jimminy!" said Amos.

"They won't go to sleep—eh?"

"It is those schelms—that's what; and they must 'a followed us yesterday."

"Who do you mean? I wish to goodness you would talk plain English."

"Billy Brent and that slimy Wicks. They're out-and-out looneys. We could have them put in the tronk for a year; and where would they be then, supposin' it's their business to watch me or you over that diamond-mine?"

"I say," said Mark, "perhaps those people over there have got guns. Let us call to them, and they will help us catch the thieves."

"This ain't a back garden, or an English farm. Call out, and the two of them would make themselves scarce. There's hiding for fifty miles and more."

"I'm quite game to tackle them alone."

"So?" said Amos, admiringly.

"They are moving off."

"Yes, but they won't go far, 'cos they're only cautious, not suspicious. I tell you what. I'm not taking any risks, but there's two ways of doing this sort of thing, and the best way is to wait for the proper time. We'll hang

on to them till that time comes. It may be this afternoon, or to-night, or to-morrow, or to-morrow night. I can wait, 'cos I have been taught to wait, an' I can go without food."

"I suppose you can," said Mark, thinking of the coverts and the poaching.

"Yes; the wood's been my school, and it were a tough school. It would be funny if I didn't know somethin'; and I ain't braggin' when I say that when it comes to bush learnin', those two chaps would be chickens. Now, what I want to know is whether you could have the patience to just sit and wait. We ain't goin' to fight; we're jest goin' to steal our things back."

"I'd rather run them down," said Mark, sturdily.

"You mean," said Amos, "you'd rather they run away?"

"Have it your own way, then."

And Amos, doubling back into the bush, but keeping near the river-bank, went up to the fire, and then picked up the spoor. This time he went at a faster gait, and, leaving the river behind, they pushed through the bush, in time, to the open country, when the two men were full in sight, stepping out briskly.

"They seem to have taken alarm."

Amos grunted. "At any rate," he said, "we can keep them in sight," and, taking advantage of isolated patches of bushes, they continued in pursuit for several miles, when the men disappeared into a gully.

"We'll jest wait," said Amos, "and if there's a trace of smoke, we'll know that I were not far out when I said they would stop to eat."

They sat down in the shade of a tree for a few minutes, until they saw a thin trace of smoke, when they struck

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the gully above and to windward of the men. Here they waited again, then edged down along the border of a little wood that filled the gully, until they saw the men at their meal, in a small clearing by the side of a pool. When the men had eaten, they smoked, and presently began to talk. Making a sign to Mark, Amos wriggled on until he got within hearing.

"Yes"—it was Wicks who was talking—"it's my opinion, my boy, that you've made a thundering mess of this business. It's highway robbery, and nothing to gain but the chance of twelve months' hard, when you've given that young limb the pull over us."

"How's he to know that we took the things?" said Brent.

"How? I suppose you've not heard that Si Amos was the best tracker among the Kaffirs?"

"If he spoors me," said Brent, "I'll put a charge of his own buckshot into him."

"And have an interview with a hanging judge? Very clever. Now, as you've bungled twice, I'm going to take a hand in this business, and you've got to follow directions."

"Oh, have I?" said Brent. "I only take directions from the boss, and then only as long as the *geld* holds out."

"The boss? And do you expect it will please the boss to know that you'd been euchred by that boy who's no better than a Kaffir? No, Mr. Brent, the boss has got a big scheme; we've got to have one as big. I've been thinking, we'll just make tracks for the wagon as quick as we can go, give those guns up, pitch a tale that we thought the guns had been stolen from them, and get the blind side of Si Amos, or of that English rooinek."

"What's your drift?"

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"Plain enough. What do we know about this yarn that the boss told me in his letter? Only this, that we've got to find out what Amos knows of the diamond-mine."

"That's easy enough, isn't it?"

"But what's in it? Tell me that, Billy. What's there to us in finding out? A matter of £50. And what's £50? A month's spree. No, my boy; what we have to do is to find if there is a diamond-mine, and if so, to get the mine for ourselves or sell it."

Mr. Brent took the pipe from his mouth, and looked at his brother rascal in admiration.

"That's something like, if we can work it out."

"You leave it to me, Billy. We'll take these guns back, soap up to those two youngers, and if they don't tell us all they know, why, I'm a Dutchman, and you're another. All I want is, that you'll leave the talking to me."

"Share and share alike."

"Share and share alike, and here's my hand on it."

The two shook hands, and Amos wriggled back.

"Come on," he said, and, after stealing up some distance, struck off at a smart pace.

"Where are you going to?"

"To the wagon."

Mark flushed up, and stood still. "Do you mean to tell me that you're running away after all your talk?"

"Come along," said Amos.

"And leave our guns behind with them?"

"That's all right. They're going to bring 'em to us. Step out, before I begin laughin'."

Mark went on, glancing every now and again at his companion's face, which was convulsed by horrible grimaces.

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"What's the matter with you?" said Mark, in disgust.

"I'm just smilin'," said Amos, looking back. "Hurry up!" And he set off down a slope to the Kareiga Drift at a long lope. When they had waded through, not stopping to take off their boots, and had reached the shelter of the bush, Amos sat down.

"They're comin' to give us back our guns, and to pitch a yarn about being friends, and all that. Don't let on that you suspect 'em: just leave the talkin' to me."

"But I don't understand."

"Well, you will by-and-by. They'll be as sweet as honey, and they're goin' to pump us about that diamond-mine. My ghoisters!" and Amos slapped his thigh.

"What! the diamond-mine?"

"That's what. What did I tell you?—that my uncle had put these two on our track, and I'll pitch 'em such a yarn as never was."

But things did not turn out quite as Amos expected, except on one point. The two men did bring the guns to the wagon, but they asked no questions. Mr. Wicks was the spokesman, and evidently he had changed his tactics.

"I hope you will forgive us," he said, with a great air of frankness, "for borrowing your guns?"

"Borrowin' them!" said Amos, sarcastically.

"That's the word, baasie. I'll tell you the truth. We came on you by chance down on the beach, and my friend, Mr. Brent, said he didn't think you would mind our taking the guns to try our luck, being short of grub. And here they are, all right."

"I suppose you would like a reward for bringing them back?" asked Mark, innocently.

"Now you're gettin' at us," said Wicks, with a sickly smile.

"It's a mercy, young gents," put in Billy, shaking his head, "that you got your guns. There's bad men in the coast bush—escaped convicts and sich, and if one of 'em had crossed your tracks it'd 'a been all u-p."

"Well, there's no harm done," said Wicks. "We're much obliged for the loan of the guns."

"You're not goin'?" said Amos, in amazement.

"Got to push on, baasie," said Wicks, with a sigh. "My friend Billy and me, we're bound for the railway works to look for a job. We're going to put in some months of steady work—eh, mate?"

"Going to earn our living by the sweat of the brow," said Billy. "Hope you've got no feeling against me, young sir?"

"No," said Mark, indifferently.

Billy took out his pipe and looked inquiringly into the empty bowl, whereat Amos handed him his pouch.

"Thanks, kindly," said Billy, filling, and passing the pouch to Wicks, who also filled up, and, in a moment of forgetfulness, dropped the pouch into his pocket.

"Thanks," said Si, holding out his hand.

"Eh! bless my heart, did I keep your pouch? D'ye see that, Billy? took the young chap's pouch. Funniest thing I ever did. Well, so long! both, and thank you. Maybe some day it will be our place to do you a service. Anyhow, we won't forget your kindness, will we, mate?"

"It's powerful dry," said Billy, and Mark very thoughtfully handed him a beaker of water. Mr. Brent looked very intently into the mug, smelt it, and handed it

back. "So long!" he said. "And think that, rough as we seem, we've got good hearts. Honesty is the best policy. Just remember that, young sir!" and Billy, shouldering his stick, marched away.

"Are you goin'?" said Amos again.

"Yes, we are going; and," said Wicks, fervently, "we are going on a straight road—dead straight for the harbour of refuge in the bay of industry. So long!"

The two of them trudged off along the centre of the dusty road, turning at a bend to wave their hands.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Amos.

"I did not hear them say anything about diamonds," said Mark, softly.

Amos leant up against the wagon.

"Did not seem to pump us much, did they?"

A snort.

"And to think," continued Mark, pleasantly, "that we followed those two honest men all the morning, almost afraid to breathe, lest we should shake a leaf!"

"They've got some plan," said Amos. "I bet they have."

"Of course. Let me see, hum—hum—they will stop near sundown to have tea; then, perhaps, they will build a fire and go to sleep with their eyes shut, after which they will probably get up again. What do you think?"

Amos looked annoyed. "Think you're clever—eh? but you wait, and these two mean sand-trampers will turn up again. They're playing dik-kop."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you come near a dik-kop's nest——"

"And what is a dik-kop?"

"Thick head, same as you, see! Well, the dik-kop

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drops his wing and shams hurt to lead you off. These two men are laying a false spoor."

"Nonsense, old chap. They've gone, and we're well rid of them. And if I were you I'd get that notion of a diamond-mine out of your head. That sort of thing grows on you, like a craving for cigarettes and red ties."

CHAPTER VIII

KOOM! KOOM! KOOM!

They trekked on, and in the night outspanned near a farm-house, where they entertained the family with music. Mark, luckily for him, had been forced to learn his notes. He could sit down and vamp to his own songs, which he sang with a fine fresh voice, with just enough music in it to make it pleasant, and not enough to make him vain. He had, too, all the charm of unaffected good nature. When the weary-looking goodwife removed a faded anti-macassar from the piano, and asked him if he could play, as it "reminded her husband of the old country," he sat down at once. He was well repaid. The farmer applauded each song with great enthusiasm, the wife laughed at his funny songs till the tears ran down her cheeks, and the shy children peeped through the door. Amos, who was quite awkward on a chair, and sat on the edge, with his hat between his fingers, was at first in a state of nervous terror lest he should be asked to sing; but, when Mark was quite hoarse, he had overcome his shyness, and began to finger his beloved mouth-organ.

"I say, Si!" said Mark, with a sudden inspiration, "give us the blackbird's song."

"It's only a bird," said Si, with absurd bashfulness; but the farmer grew excited.

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"Can you imitate a blackbird?" he said.

"You can't tell the difference between his whistling and the bird."

"It is thirty years since I heard the English bird sing—thirty years," said the farmer.

Amos cleared his throat, pursed his lips, and the little room was filled with the harmony of a spring morning in the woods. Round and rich the notes poured from his lips, and the walls faded away as the farmer's face grew set, and his eyes stared straight before him. There were the green hills, the little red-tiled church with its grey turret, the red fields, and the deep lane that led up through the oaks to a little white house. The atmosphere came back to him, the very scent of the wild honeysuckle, and when the boy had finished, and looked shyly for applause, the farmer was groping in the backwaters of his memory, just stirred into motion.

"If I had shut my eyes," said Mark, anxious that Si should not be wounded by the silence, "I would have sworn that it was a blackbird."

"Ay," said the farmer; "it was the whole countryside. It brought it all back. Thank you, lad, thank you."

"It was beautiful," said the goodwife. "My husband often talks of the blackbird and the grey bird."

"The greybird? yes. I suppose you could not remember the thrush's song? Of course not. Don't you try it, lad."

Amos whistled a brief catch, the melody that is heard often when the snow is on the ground.

"'Tis the robin, mother."

Then the boy threw his head back, tried a note or two,

and broke out into the twilight song of the thrush, with its soft repetitions and its glad triumphant finish.

The farmer was delighted; he shook hands twice over, and made them promise to remain to breakfast. Dave they found sitting by the fire near his beloved oxen, who were chewing the cud, and he volunteered a remark.

"Been to sleep," he said, "an' I yeard a dream-bird sing."

"What was the song like?" asked Mark.

"Well, you know the yellow-bird?"

"The golden oriole?"

"Yes;" and Dave paused. "Well, it weren't like that. No, I guess not. It were just a dream-bird. And the achter-oss yeard him too. I see him switch his tail."

"Are you quite sure it was a bird you heard, Dave?"

Dave had come to the end of his talk; but there was an answer from out the dark—a loud booming, three times repeated, like the "koom! koom! koom!" of a lion.

"By Jove!" said Mark. "What's that?"

"Struis vogel," muttered Dave.

"What?"

"Just a bird," said Amos.

"A bird!" with scorn. "I may be a new chum; but I'm not to be caught with chaff like that."

Again there came the call, loud as a trumpet-blast, with a deep bass of a trombone.

"How far is it off?"

"Maybe a mile."

"And you wish me to believe it is made by a bird?"

"Maybe it's a lion. You've yeard a lion, Dave; is it like that?"

"Ja."

"By Jove!" said Mark, with brightening eyes.

"Better come in the wagon," said Amos.

"I think so, also," said Dave, solemnly.

"Don't you think we'd better warn the people in the house?" asked Amos, as he peered out into the pitchy night.

"I wouldn't worry 'em. Might frighten the children," said Dave. "But, if you ain't scared, you might crawl under the wagon with your gun an' watch. Perhaps you'd get a shot. But it would be scarey business."

"I never heard of lions so far south," said Mark, doubtfully.

"Might have lost his way," said Amos. "By jimminy, there he calls again, and nearer. I'll get my head under the blanket."

Dave handed out the gun, and Mark prepared to pass the night under the wagon, watching. It was the most miserable night he had spent, and in the small hours, when a cold wind sprung up, he crawled into the wagon, worn out.

"Did you see anything?" asked Amos, at sunbreak.

"Why did you wake me, you selfish little brute?"

"Wake up and come along for a swim." And without ceremony Mark was dragged out by his legs, to start off in hot pursuit of his tormentor.

"You let up," said Amos, puffing, "and I'll show you the lion, honest Injun I will. Go slow, and prepare to cut like anyhow."

With elaborate caution Amos approached a part of the farm fenced in, and, crouching down behind a bush, pointed at a round grey object on the ground.

"See it?"

"Do you mean that ant-hill?"

"That ain't no ant-hill. It's a hen ostrich sitting on her nest. See her neck stretched out along the ground."

"I see. She looks exactly like a stone, or bush, or ant-hill."

"That's so. And do you know why she keeps her neck like that? There's some fool-people would tell you the ostrich sticks its head in a bush or the sand when it's hunted. Never yeard such silliness. The ostrich squats down, and, its back bein' round, it would look like a bush, as you say, if it weren't for its flag-post of a neck. Well, the bird knows that well enuff, and it stretches its neck along the ground. By gum! here comes the roarer."

Mark started, looked round, to see a tall black cock ostrich marching inside the fence, with its white tail cocked up, its wings held away from its sides, and its head jerking to each stride.

"That's him—that's the bugler."

The ostrich stopped, its neck suddenly swelled out, and the "Koom! koom! koom! koom!" boomed out.

Mark stared at the huge bird in amazement, and then, as he recalled the hours of misery he had spent watching for "the lion," he turned to pulverize Amos, but found that Si had slipped off, and was trotting back to the house, where the farmer's wife stood waving her apron as a summons to breakfast.

"Where have you been?" asked the farmer, ladling out some crushed mealies boiled in milk.

"Clinton thought he yeard a lion last night, and Dave Robey he thought he yeard a dream-bird, but it turned out to be just a ostrich trumpetin'."

“Reminds me,” said the farmer, laughing, “of a fellow who heard some frogs croaking after a storm, and went out with his gun looking for them, thinking they were birds.”

Mark joined in the laughter at his expense, and when they resumed the journey, Amos let him down easily. He only referred to the matter about once an hour during the rest of the day, when the incident was forgotten by mutual consent.

In the early trek of the next morning they were one in a procession of wagons passing down the wide High Street, and the still wider Bathurst Street, wide enough for a cricket match, to the Market Square, a square big enough to take in Covent Garden, Smithfield, Leadenhall, and Southwark Markets; in fact, large enough for London as a market-place. The ox-wagon is the cause of this overgrown market, and not the dimensions of the trade done. An ox-wagon requires almost as much room to turn round in as a battleship. The wagons were drawn up in a double line, with the oxen facing north and south, and a width between the rows of perhaps one hundred yards. There were wagons with firewood; wagons with oat-hay packed in bundles as high as a hay-rick, and yellow with the ripe straw; wagons loaded with oranges and with pines, with big pumpkins and with odds and ends, such as baskets of eggs, kegs of butter, bottles of honey, a pig or two, and crates of poultry. At the end of the row of wagons was an iron shed, in which was other produce, from waxbill birds in a cage to sides of beef, and beyond the shed were pens, with six-foot rails, occupied, as it chanced to be stock fair day, with ostriches; while beyond the pens were clusters of cattle, horses, Cape carts,

and sheep, all in charge of black boys. The square was liberally covered with the dust from dry cow-chips; and as fresh troops of stock arrived, there was a fine distribution of dust—a trifling inconvenience, which did not appear to trouble any one.

“What do you think of Grahamstown?” asked Amos, with an assumption of unconcern, though he was visibly swelling with pride.

“It’s a pretty little country place,” said Mark.

“A pretty little country place!” muttered Amos. “Did you see the cathedral?”

“You pointed it out to me—a stone-built church with a white spire. Looked brand new.”

“An’ the town hall?”

“The place with the clock? Yes.”

“And the street lamps?”

“I did not notice the lamps.”

“Ever see a cathedral in a little country town in England? or a market-place big as this? or trees as tall as them gums?”

“Blue gums don’t grow that size in England.”

“An’ you’ve got the cool, dasht imperdence to up an’ tell me this is a pretty—little—country—place.”

“All right; don’t get excited. It is pretty, and it is little, and it is countryfied, isn’t it?”

“Well, look here; don’t you let on that to any person who belongs to the town, or he might arst you to walk up to the burial-ground over yonder, and get yourself put away. That’s so. There’s only one town in the world when you’re here, and it’s Grahamstown.”

“I’ll remember,” said Mark, laughing.

“See the chap with the beard. He’s the mayor.

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Come long. I say, Mr. Mayor, this is a friend of mine—Clinton, just arrived.”

“Ah, Si my friend. Glad to see you, Clinton. What do you think of our city?”

“It’s a very jolly lit—— Whow, you brute!” this not to the mayor, but to Amos, who had put in a reminder on his friend’s shins. “I beg your pardon, sir; I was saying that I don’t remember ever to have seen a city like this.”

“Quite right, Clinton. We are unique. You must see our mountain drive. Are you here as a migrant or an e-migrant, Clinton? Do you cab, so to speak, to other shores, or will you shore your cab-in, so to say, here among the ranks of your fellow-countrymen?”

“I have come out to learn farming.”

“Very good. Farming is the best school of culture that you could—ah—cultivate. For instance, take the limes. Do you know, Clinton, what is the best thing to do with the lemon?”

“No, sir.”

“Squeeze it;” and his worship the mayor sauntered off with a grave face, and a mournful look in his eyes, in search of another victim; for his worship had a reputation as a punster, and the vice held him fast.

“Is your name Clinton?”

“It is;” and Mark found that a hairy person, who had been listening to the mayor, was the speaker.

“Heard the mayor say so,” said the man, suspiciously. “And you told him you were going to learn farming.”

“I did.”

“That’s a fact. Well, it don’t matter; but I’m a farmer, and it’s come to this, that I can’t do the work single-handed. There’s many a young chap would jump

at the chance of learning from me—jump at it; but I like your face.”

Mark did not like the face of the hairy person at all, but he expressed his thanks.

“Yes, young Clinton, my farm, as the mayor said, is a school.”

“What’s yer farm?” said Amos—“pumpkins or beetles?”

The farmer ignored Amos. “I farm three thousand acres down by the Fish River. Grow wheat, barley, forage, fruit of all kinds; rear pigs an’ turkeys; breed cattle, an’ horses, an’ sheep, It’s just a complete farm, and the fee is only £20 down.”

“Git,” said Amos.

“Who asked you to speak?”

“G-i-t git. No one ever raised all them things on one farm. That’s your wagon over there, ain’t it?”

“Well, what of it?”

“Only this, that it’s loaded with wood, and nothin’ else. If you’ve come from the Fish River, it’s took you a day and a half to come, and you’ll be a day an’ a half gettin’ home. Three days, and your load ’ll fetch 25/-; 25/- for three days gives the show away.”

“Got a stick er terbak?” asked the man with a grin.

Amos handed over his pouch.

“Got a light?” asked the man; and, striking the match on the sole of his boot, he slouched his hat over his eyes and slouched away with a “Well, so long!”

“Appeared to be trying it on—eh?” said Mark.

“No farmer who is a farmer is goin’ to arst you to join him. Remember that. You’ll have to do the arstin’ yourself. That chap’s a wood-farmer.”

"A wood-farmer?"

"That's all. Jes' lives on choppin' down firewood for sale, and don't grow enuff to keep his family in vegetables, or milk, or butter, or meat. Mind you, he cuts wood down, but he never plants a tree, which is worse'n killin' game. The wood an' bush is the hair of the land. Take a dog with the mange or a scabby sheep; they're bare in patches. All right. These wood-choppers go on cuttin' an' cuttin', and where they found shade and moisture an' cover for the cattle, they leave the bare veld, sun-baked and sick. The Kaffirs knew a durn sight better. They took away the dried stuff and the underwood, which gave air to the trees. If I were the Government, I'd make these chaps plant out one tree a day."

"They seem to have planted trees about the hills," said Mark, looking up to a fringe of pines on the surrounding ridges.

"Oh, ay, they've planted trees, but for every tree they've planted they've burnt up a hundred. There were a kloof over yonder facin' the sea, with maybe a square mile of trees, and they've gone up the chimneys in smoke. There were another kloof to the right, an' it's bein' stripped. You see, the wind that comes off the sea blew the seeds into the valleys facin' the south, and the mist gave them moisture, so that wherever there was a valley facin' that way there was a wood. An' the woods held the mist—see? and the mist gave the moisture and fed the springs. Well, it's easier to handle a axe than a spade or a plough, and the lazy people took to thinnin' out the kloofs. By'mby they'll get thinned out themselves, and the tree-planters will come along, and maybe in the time comin' this country will be like it were in

the old days—thick with wood an' game, an' with runnin' water."

Amos ran on his hobby, and he would have waxed more eloquent if the ringing of the market-bell had not diverted his attention. The market was opened. The market-master stood on a chair, with a cluster of citizens about him, some on horseback, but the most on foot in easy attire, and as he shifted from one wagon to the next, the crowd moved with him, just casually interested in the business, and without the slightest trace of the fever of competition. The citizens were there for a morning gossip with the farmers; there was a shaking of hands, and interchange of tobacco-pouches, a polishing up of old stories, and every now and again a careless nod to the market-master. All appeared to be on the same footing of sociable equality. The man who made the mayor's boots was taking the liberty of capping one of his worship's jokes; the gentleman who supplied the keen-faced barrister with chops was laying down the law on market overt; and the eminent grocer was in a close argument with the hon. member for the city in the House of Assembly; while the Baptist minister was explaining to the Dean the law of atoms. The baa-ing of sheep, the bellowing of cows to their calves, the barking of dogs, and the yells of Kaffirs from the open space beyond, where the troops of animals were gathering for the stock fair, kept Mark in a state of bewilderment.

"Is your name Clinton?"

Mark, on his guard, turned to see an elderly man, loosely dressed, with an old hat and his feet in slippers; his eyes were kind, however, and there was an air of authority about him.

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"I knew your father, met him in the Kaffir War. He wrote to me about you. You must come and breakfast with me." And he moved away to bid for a load of wood.

"Who is that, Amos?" asked Mark.

"What do you think he is—eh?"

"Some old soldier, perhaps."

"I know him. He can speak Kaffir like—like anythin', and he's got a big place. I say, you're in luck; but I know what."

"Well?"

"You'll smarten, get stuck-up, and give me a nod, 'Ah, how do, Amos?'"

"Nonsense. But you haven't told me who he is."

"He was Minister for Native Affairs."

"A member of the Government?"

"That's what. And now you're swelling with pride. You're feelin' for your moustache, but there ain't any."

The Ex-Minister for Native Affairs strolled by, and went off with Mark, leaving Amos looking glumly after them.

Mark enjoyed his breakfast, and he enjoyed listening to the stories told by his host about his father.

"Your father tells me that you wish to learn farming. Well, I have been a farmer myself, and I do not wish to discourage any one from following a pursuit that suited me. But it is a hard life. Tell me your ideas."

Mark spoke frankly about his hopes, and his host listened patiently.

"Well," he said, "I don't know that I can give you much advice. You will have to learn everything, and all depends on your application and powers of observation."

I will introduce you to a very good friend of mine—Mr. Amner.”

Mark warmly expressed his thanks.

“Don't be in a hurry. Mr. Amner may not take you, but if he does, you must remember one thing—that he knows his business.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Well, I'm only telling you. A very decent sort of boy was with Mr. Amner. He got on splendidly for three days, and then he docked the tail of the best riding-horse. Of course, a horse wants all his tail to keep the flies off. Well, that storm blew over, and then the youngster told Amner it was perfectly sinful the way he wasted the manure, and awfully slipshod farming to let the calves go with the cows, instead of weaning them. That ended the engagement. And now we'll go to the Market Square.”

They reached the market, and the introduction was made. There was nothing of the tyrant about Mr. Amner. He was a tall, thin man, with a fair beard, mild blue eyes, and a very friendly smile—exactly the sort of man that most coarse-grained people would at once attempt to patronize. He was a Colonial of the Colonials, born of British parents who had been born in the Colony, the offspring of the settlers of 1820, and he knew of England only by tradition; yet, like others of his class, was even more deeply loyal to the old flag than Englishmen themselves. He had a passionate pride in the glory of the Mother Land, apart from a particularly pronounced and burning contempt for those strange Englishmen who were always against their own country, and always down upon colonists. A man whose immediate forefathers had carved

out a home against tremendous odds, who had himself lived laborious days, fought in the wars, and was the member of a family which had put over twenty men in the field at one time, and who had always treated the Kaffirs in his employment well, he bitterly resented the criticism of superior Englishmen—that Colonials were a bad lot, who treated the natives cruelly.

“Come to teach us how to farm, Mr. Clinton?” was the farmer’s greeting.

“I have come to learn, Mr. Amner, and I want you to give me a chance.”

“Pines are very cheap, Mr. Clinton,” said the farmer. “When I started growing pines the fruit fetched 1s. 6d. a piece; now the price is 1s. 6d. a dozen.”

Mark did not see what the price of pine-apples had to do with his application; but Mr. Amner seemed to be awaiting an intelligent reply, and he murmured, “By Jove!”

“Mr. Amner is the father of pine-apple growing in this district,” volunteered the ex-Minister.

“By Jove—eh?” muttered Mark.

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Amner, in the manner of a man who was eagerly searching for information from an authority, “you think I ought to can the fruit, or ship them to the London market—eh?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about pines,” said Mark, with a frank laugh, “except how to eat them.”

“And I bet you don’t know how to eat them,” put in the statesman, with a jovial laugh. “You’d cut the fruit in slices—eh? Well, you’re wrong. The best way is to dig the middle out with a fork or spoon.”

“That’s so,” said Mr. Amner, stroking his beard, as he

looked at Mark. "You can come down and try the right way. Got any traps?"

"Yes, Mr. Amner, in a wagon over there."

"Regular house full of things—eh?"

"No, sir; a couple of boxes or so, and a bag."

"Well, you can put your bag into my cart; book your boxes to Clumber Station, and ride down yourself."

Mr. Amner held up his whip to the auctioneer, who was selling a fine Cape cow, and secured the prize at £35. That done, he moved away to inspect his property in company with the man whose last bid he had topped.

"That's all right," said the ex-Minister, heartily, "and I'm very pleased——"

"That he bought the cow?" said Mark.

"That he has taken you on."

"You mean to say that he really wants me to work for him?" asked Mark, with excitement.

"Of course. But he thinks you should find your own horse. Have you any money?"

"I've got about £20. That won't do, will it?"

"Come along," and they dodged in and out of troops of men and cattle, of carts and wagons, sheep and ostriches, to a spot where another auctioneer was singing the praises of a rough-haired pony with a dejected appearance.

"This thoroughbred," said the auctioneer, "has had a most remarkable career. He was captured in the war no less than seventeen times, and escaped death on more occasions than I would care to mention, by an extraordinary intelligence. Whenever there was danger ahead, gentlemen, he always ran the other way. Who says £55?"

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"Half a crown," said a gentleman in khaki, but the bid was not taken, and by-and-by the treasure was knocked down for £7 10s.

"Your name, sir?"

"Clinton."

"You've got a bargain, Mr. Clinton, only he wants humouring, like the Irishman's pig;" and the auctioneer passed on to the next item, leaving Mark in possession of his shaggy pony.

"Say. Is your name Clinton?"

Mark was by this time suspicious of strangers who were free with his name. "What is it?" he demanded of a tired-looking youth.

"Ony this. Si Amos arst me to tell you he was tired of waiting to say Good-bye. He had a chanct of getting away somewhere over yon-der, and he's scooted."

"Amos gone? left the town?"

"That's what I sed. I say, I'll swaap a mule I got over there for this yer horse."

"Which way did he go?"

"Dunno. Say, you'll want a saddle. I'll let you have mine for 15s."

CHAPTER IX

ON THE FARM

Mark was distressed at the news about Amos, and had an idea of trying to overtake the boy, but he could get no information. Dave Robey had very little to say.

"Yes, he went," he said. "Seen him talking to a ole Kaffir; then he got his things and trekked."

"Did he tell you why he was going?"

"Didn't say nothin' 'cept 'So long!' My, he could whistle. What'll I do with your boxes? leave 'em at the station unless, maybe, you'll trek along. I've got a load to Fort Beaufort, and will bring back wool."

"Thanks, Dave, but I am going on to a farm."

"I ain't charging anything," said Dave, staring away.

"You're awfully good," said Mark, shaking the big fellow by the hand. "But I hope to see you again."

"Ever year him tell that porkipine story?"

"No, Dave."

"N' more did I. He could yarn—eh? I say, you ain't forgot about them wopses?" and Dave looked sadly at his boots.

"No, old man."

"Well, so long!" Dave shook hands listlessly; then he uncoiled his long whip, and in a moment of forgetfulness sent it smacking along the sleek sides of his oxen.

"Yak!" he cried; "eh England, you skepsel! Kaffirland, you regt slechte arme bijwoner, trek fo!"

The wagon rumbled off in a cloud of dust, and Mark felt lonely at this sudden breaking up of the little company of three.

"You seem to have struck up with a couple of queer friends, Clinton," remarked the ex-Minister, as he looked after the shambling figure of the wagon-driver.

"They have been very good friends, sir."

"That's right, youngster. Stand by your friends, and they'll stand by you. We'll put your bag in Mr. Amner's cart, pick up a saddle somewhere, and then ride."

His kindly host seemed to know every one in the place, and was continually stopped by men in puttees and riding-breeches, who walked with a decided cavalry roll, and who were one and all anxious that he should have a drink, "and bring your friend too."

There was only one answer, and it was in the form of a cigar.

"You see," he explained to Mark, "I have seen, well, no end of men—good men—go to the bad because they got into the habit of drinking. At the same time, I don't wish to offend my friends by refusing. I have found that a cigar squares matters."

"I think," said Mark, "the best way would be to say that you don't want to drink."

"I suppose it would, my lad; but it doesn't pay to get a reputation for being unsociable. You lose your influence. An unsociable man remains, after his measure has been taken, in a class by himself, and no one cares a button for his opinion."

Mark watched a bargain for a very brown saddle with

very thin stuffing. About four o'clock the long-tailed horse, which had been named "Pots" because of its distended paunch, was saddled, and Mark said Good-bye to the gentleman who had taken so much trouble because he was his father's son. It cannot be said that the young settler felt happy in the possession of his first bit of live stock. Young fellows with an easy, careless seat were continually passing him, and Pots, whenever he heard the clatter of hoofs, always moved to one side with the humility of a sheep and the deliberation of an ass. Every rider on passing favoured him with a grave inspection, then made his own horse "spoog," or prance, by pulling on the rein. However, in course of an hour's slow progress, he passed out of the town on to the high-road, where he had to encounter the lesser ordeal of the black and the white critics in the empty wagons returning to the farms. Three miles out the road forked. He had been directed to take the left turning, but Pots preferred to keep on. There was a long and heated argument, which ended in Pots backing over a bank. Here the two of them were found by a wagon-driver, Mark angry, the pony calmly reflective.

"Stubborn—eh?" said the driver, as if stubbornness was rather a commendable vice. "I'll settle that," and he settled it by tying the neck rheim to the end of the wagon, and applying the lash to the hind quarters.

Pots succumbed to his fate, and jiggled along for a couple of hours, when a drove of oxen got on his nerves, and he prepared to take up his quarters for the night.

"Have one of my oxen," with a grin. "Halloa! bless me if it ain't young Clinton! How are you, baasie?"

Mark saw the hairy face of Mr. William Brent.

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"I say, young mister, me and Soapy Wicks has parted. He's gone his way, and I'm going mine—straight, I am; and by the same token I see young Amos clearing out o' town this mornin'."

"Did he speak to you?"

"Well, he did and he didn't. I ask him where he was going, and he said, affable like, 'Look here, Billy Brent, you mind your own business.' He's written you a letter."

"Did he tell you?"

"Well, not 'xactly so to speak; but he gave the letter to a chap to post, and the chap gave me a sight of it. I guess he heard some big news," and Mr. Brent looked cunningly into Mark's face.

"About the di—about the place where he's going to?"

"I dunno what about," said Billy Brent; "but he looked 's if he'd yeard somethin'. I'm driving these yer oxen to Burnt Kraal."

"Burnt Kraal! that's where I am going."

"Well, now," said Mr. Brent, innocently, "that is rummy—rummiest thing I ever yeard happen. Mr. Amner he ses to me, 'Can you drive oxen?' 'Can I chew terbak?' I ses. 'Well,' he ses, 'you drive these oxen to my place, and maybe I will give you a job if you're honest.' So I up and told him how I'd been mejum honest, but were now full honest. I just want a chanct, young mister."

Pots gave away the secret which had so long been his own. Some farmer's lad near by fired a shot, and Pots, thinking the enemy was upon him, broke into a spasmodic gait, which he kept up a good six miles. Mark, with a wild whoop, urged the fiery steed to another burst, at the end of which he stood in a regular lather at the edge of a "drift" in a deep valley.

Mark climbed off, and sat down on the grass, with a great pretence of admiring the view, but really because he was aching from top to toe. He asked a passing stranger the distance to Mr. Amner's.

"Another two miles."

It proved to be the longest two miles that Mark had ever tackled, and it was with a sigh of gratitude that he lowered himself into an armchair in Mr. Amner's dining-room, where the table was already laid for supper. At supper-time Mr. Amner discussed the chat of the market, and Mark was wondering when his own affairs would be mentioned, when Mr. Amner suddenly suggested that it was time for bed, and showed him into a little room outside.

"Good night," he said. "We are up at sunrise."

Mark sat on a box and looked about him by the light of a single candle. Slowly, and with many pauses to look around, he at last undressed and got into bed, where, in spite of his tired feeling, he lay awake listening to the far-off barking of a dog, and to a strange droning which he finally put down as the murmur of the sea.

The awakening came, of course, all too soon, but the startling cause of the droning noise aroused him to the change in his life. A number of bees were buzzing about the room, and following their flight, he saw that they streamed out from a hole in the floor beneath which they evidently had their hive.

Mark hurried into his clothes, and found the farmer in his garden with a pruning-knife.

"Can I help you?"

"Well, yes. Inspan the greys, and drive over to the station for your boxes, and a bag of seed potatoes. You'll get back for breakfast."

"Certainly," said Mark; and with a look around to get his bearings, made for the stable, where he engaged in an effort to unravel the puzzle of the harness, which he finally solved.

"If I were you I'd shift that harness on to the other horse—the off-side horse."

"I don't know which is which," said Mark.

"By the mark of the pole. See, it has rubbed the hair off a little on his near side; and the near-side horse has the hair rubbed on his off-side."

"I see, sir."

The horses were inspanned at last, Mr. Amner refraining from giving any assistance.

"For," he said, "when you've done a thing once you'll know how to do it another time."

He took a seat in the cart to show the way, and they returned in time for breakfast, being received this time by Mrs. Amner and her daughter, the latter a quiet girl, with a shy manner.

Mark felt at home at once, because his morning's work had pleased him. He had made a start, at any rate. But he was puzzled at two things—the smallness of the house, and the informality of his engagement. Apparently there were only five rooms, and they were all on the ground floor, with a thatched roof and whitewashed walls—the sort of accommodation that would have done for a keeper in England.

"I am afraid you will find the country very quiet, Mr. Clinton. Our nearest neighbour is three miles away, and we very seldom see any one."

"How jolly, Miss Amner! I like the country, where I can always get plenty of amusement in watching insect life."

"Ticks," said Mr. Amner, "and scorpions, and snakes, and tarantulas; they all make very pleasant pets."

Miss Amner held up her hands. "I'm sure I find nothing so interesting as natural history."

"There's a chap I knew who knows more about the birds and animals and their ways than anybody. I wonder if you ever met him; his name is Amos—Silas Amos."

Miss Amner grew suddenly very rosy. "We went to school together," she said.

"You went to school," said Mrs. Amner, "but he never learnt his lessons. I never saw such a boy as he was. But where could you have met him?"

"I met him in England, and travelled up with him from Port Elizabeth."

"Is the boy back?" inquired Mrs. Amner, with a look at her daughter. "Where is he now?"

"I wish I could tell you. He left Grahamstown suddenly yesterday, without saying Good-bye; and I believe he has gone on a long journey."

"That is just like him. I've known him to wander away into the bush with an old heathen Kaffir for weeks at a time, and when he came out his clothes would be all in rags. I'm glad he is not coming here." And Mrs. Amner shut her lips very tight.

"Time's up!" And Mr. Amner rose.

"Oh, pa!" said Miss Amner, "I'm sure Mr. Clinton must be very tired."

"If you feel tired——" began Mr. Amner.

"Tired! Of course he does. Because you never want to rest, you must not think that other people are as tough. Mr. Clinton can sit there on the stoep and tell us the news while we work."

Mr. Amner moved off without another word; but Mark was at his side.

"I'm ready sir," he said, with a smile. "I've had a jolly time for two months, and I want to get to work."

"I have three jobs on hand," said the farmer, with a nod: "hole-digging, for fence-poles; furrows, for irrigation; and dam-making. Of course you'd like to start on the dam?"

"Wouldn't I, though?"

"Very well; the dam it is"; and Mr. Amner went down through a kitchen garden laid on the slope of a valley, to where a fine weeping willow overhung a small stream, its long pendent branches appearing like whips fringed with leaves. The bottle-shaped nests of a noisy colony of yellow finches hung necks downwards from the swaying supports; and in the fork of the tree was the huge nest of the "podder-fanger" (frog-catcher), a dingy brown wader, who has, like the smaller finch, thought out a scheme of evading his enemies by having two openings to his nest. "We'll throw a wall just above the tree, between those two sticks. I can only allow you one boy. Now how will you set about the work?"

Mark took a glance at the problem. "I think we should cut a track across where the dam is to be, and then build up the wall, taking the soil from above."

"That's right; but you want a puddle of clay for the centre, flanked by bundles of reeds. The clay you will find on the slope above, and the reeds up the valley, Congela, Sixpence!"

A black "boy," who had been standing with a vacant expression, responded to this name.

"Sixpence, the young baas will tell you what to do."

"Ja, baas," said Sixpence, with a grin.

Mr. Amner went on his way; and Mark took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and caught up the pick. Sixpence smiled a friendly smile, and sat down. Mark proceeded to chip out a line between the stakes; then he decided on the width, and traced a parallel line back.

Then he gave the pick to Sixpence, who accepted it with visible astonishment.

"Now, Sixpence, you pick up the ground, and I will shovel it out."

Sixpence grinned.

"Fire away!" said Mark.

"Ja, bass;" and Sixpence started off for the house.

"Come back, you black rascal! Where were you going?"

"Yinny!" said Sixpence, still grinning. "Baas say 'fire.' I get fire for baas him pipe."

"Take up that pick and dig."

Sixpence spat on his hands, grunted, and drove the pick in about one inch. Then he grunted again, pulled it out slowly, and began a search over his person, which ended in the production of a black pipe ornamented with bits of shining tin.

"Baas got t'wak?"

Mark went to his coat for tobacco; and Sixpence sat down to rest.

"Do some work first," said Mark, "and then you can have tobacco."

"Leetle stick t'wak, my baas," said Sixpence.

"Work, you lazy beggar!"

"Yah!" and for the first time the English boy heard the Kaffir click, made by pressing the tongue against the

roof of the mouth, and then sharply withdrawing it. Mark knew what the sound meant, for Amos had told him. A click is a distinct defiance, as much as was the biting of the thumb, or as is the midshipman's signal.

"When a Kaffir clicks at you," said Amos, "knock him down," and a second later Sixpence was rubbing his head, while Mark was rubbing his knuckles.

"Will you work?"

"Ja, my baas!" and Sixpence swung his pick with a new vigour. He had "tried it on" without success, but he bore no malice, and as he picked he sang, and after him Mark went shovelling the loosened earth. Presently the trench was outlined, and while Mark went off for a wheelbarrow to bring down the clay for puddling, he instructed Sixpence to deepen the trench. Now, a Kaffir can never dig a square, and when Mark returned he found that the beautifully straight trench he had left was bow-shaped, with a curve inwards. But behold! this natural infirmity of Sixpence, when confronted with a straight line, had produced a scientific design for a dam. A straight dam bears an even pressure, but if it goes it goes all together; a bow-shaped dam, with the bow outwards, exposes the centre arch to the full pressure, but a bow-shaped wall with the bow inwards, throws the pressure to the sides against the natural walls. Mark was seized with an inspiration.

"By Jove!" he said, "we'll build it with an angle up stream." And so it was that when Mr. Amner came in the evening to inspect, he found that his new "hand" had laid a dam on a plan new to him, though old enough, as it happened.

"You've worked well," he said, "very well indeed; but say, do you expect the water to run up stream?"

"No, sir," said Mark, and he proceeded to explain why he had kept to the design, not without an unpleasant recollection of the new chum who had docked the tail of the horse.

Mr. Amner pondered over the matter. "I see," he said, "the force of the flood-water will be thrown to the sides, and we can make a cutting on each side to lead off the overflow, and the water for the irrigation furrows as well. That will give us a higher pitch for distribution."

"So it will," said Mark with pride.

Mr. Amner looked from Mark's bruised knuckles to a dark bruise on the forehead of Sixpence, then told the boy to place the tools in the shed. Sixpence went off, chanting.

"So? You hit him?"

"He cheeked me," said Mark.

"I'm not blaming you. He took the first opportunity to try your mettle, just as a spirited horse would, and he's satisfied. Just one thing: don't 'let him down' before his folk. He is a Kaffir of the Xosa fighting stock, and they will sometimes bear a grudge if you make them look ridiculous. Don't treat him as a familiar, but don't domineer; just be fair and square, with a touch of dignity and decision, and you've got the secret for managing natives. That's all."

They went up to the little house, which appeared to Mark very desirable as a resting-place after the first day of hard work, and after tea he watched the sun go down in such a blaze as he had never before witnessed, and heard the ghon-ya calling at the sudden coming of the dark like a voice of wailing protest.

"What is that?" as the cry came "ghon—ya," long drawn out; then an interval and "ghon-ya-aa-aa" again.

"Sounds 's if it might be a wolf yowling, but it ain't. It's just a 'blaas-op,' a 'blow-up,' a sort of locust, with a rubber body no bigger than a hen's egg. With that drum he can produce a sound that travels a mile."

"I'm afraid you're laughing at me."

"Oh no," put in Miss Amner. "It really is only an insect. Si Amos caught one for me, and that reminds me there is a letter for you in his handwriting."

Mark sat up a little while, listening to the calls of the night-birds, then went into his room, where, by the light of the candle, he read his letter, while the bees murmured in their retreat below the floor. It was a short letter written in pencil. "I say," it began, "you seem mighty stuck-up. I'm just writing this to tell you that I met the old black chap who died. Well, he isn't dead. Me and him's going you know where, to look for you know what. We're in a hurry, because the old chap says he ain't got much time to stay. I say, he were asking after that horn stick. Says my father set great store by it. Don't give it away or lose it. So long!"

"I think," muttered Mark, "he might have given me the chance of going with him;" and then he sat weaving imaginary pictures of the adventures that Amos would encounter in his journey to the mysterious land of diamonds, until a large moth extinguished the candle, when he woke out of his dream and became conscious of a sound outside his window. His rhinoceros stick was in the corner. He groped for it, and softly stole out at the door and round the side of the room to the corner. As he

put his head round the corner there was a vicious whirl and a blow that fell on the fleshy part of his shoulder. Jumping forward, he struck with his heavy weapon, and his assailant fled at once without a sound. Mark followed at top speed in the dark, when he was suddenly hurled to the ground with great force, and lay in apprehension of a renewed attack. Hearing nothing, he picked himself up, and made the discovery that he had run into a wire fence. Much bewildered by the shock, he returned to his room, and after a painful attempt to think what had happened, went to bed with a bad headache. In the morning the headache had gone, and with a growing disinclination to make a fuss over an incident that he did not himself clearly grasp, he said nothing. He noticed, however, that Sixpence bore himself very sullenly, and that after breakfast, when he took off the red handkerchief he wore round his head, there was the mark of a fresh wound.

“Where did you get that hurt, Sixpence?”

“Aandias,” said Sixpence, surlily.

“Aandias? Who is Aandias? What is the matter with you?”

Aandias said Sixpence went off with a wheelbarrow to bring down some more clay.

Mark was pretty well convinced that he had found his assailant, and he kept a very keen watch on the Kaffir, whose bearing continued to be morose until the afternoon, when an accident happened which brought back cheerfulness to the black face. A Kaffir maid chanced that way, no doubt by design; but be that as it may, the song she sang made Sixpence straighten up. She wore a red bandanna round her curly kinks, her arms and shoulders were bare, a short skirt of red blanket swayed above her

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bare ankles, and a circle of burnished bangles tinkled on her wrists.

Sixpence threw out his chest and boomed a note of greeting, whereupon the maid, as if for the first time alive to his presence, became bashful, and turned her head away. Sixpence, with a kerrie in his hand, stalked majestically up, and playfully dusted her kilted skirt with the stick, while she made pretence of being mightily alarmed. After a brief flirtation, in which the gentleman showed his skill with the kerrie, the girl went off, and the further she went the less shy she grew, until, when she reached the crest of the hill, she was proclaiming her love or her contempt at the top of her voice.

Sixpence returned to his work with a great scheme in his mind.

"Baas," he said, in a soft, coaxing voice, "you give it me—sixpence?"

"What for?"

"Baas give me sixpence? I buy dook for that girl. Vely nice girl. If had one, two, tree, fife cows, would buy for wife. Baas give me sixpence?"

"Tell me first who made your head sore."

"Yoh," said Sixpence, and stalked away much offended, for more clay, but on his return he opened the subject. "Why you want know—eh? Want tell the ou' baas I been barelay?"

"Been for the clay?"

Sixpence stared at Mark, then clapped his hand over his mouth and laughed till he sat down.

"Been fo' de clay!" he gasped. "Neh, baas; barclay—fight—see?" and Sixpence, picking up his long kerrie, threw himself into an attitude that was never learnt in a

fencing-school, but was nevertheless framed on a style which had the sanction of tradition.

The Xosa Kaffirs are undoubtedly the greatest masters with the single-stick there are, but their single-stick is not a tender length of green hazel with a basket-hilt—it is longer by a foot, made from the toughest assegai wood, and there is no guard for the hand. The Kaffir balances himself on his toes, with his body forward, and the kerrie held out at its extreme length. With a wrist of iron, the eye of a hawk, and the agility of an antelope, he is willing to take on two men of any other race at once.

“Barclay!” said Sixpence, lunging out at a tuft of grass five feet away, and whirling his stick behind him. “Fingo men catch Sixpence, gin-lin-ga-pi-i-ya.”

“Where?” asked Mark.

“Gin-lin-ga-pi-i-ya,” said Sixpence, lingering on the vowels, and pointing over the hill. “Catch him in de bush. Fingo men much sick to-day. Baas, give me sixpence?”

“You are quite sure you did not get hurt up by the house last night? Come, now, didn’t you look in at my window?”

“Yinny!” exclaimed Sixpence in surprise.

“See here,” said Mark, rolling up his sleeve, and showing a bruise on his shoulder; “some one hit me last night.”

“Ma woh!”

“Did you do it?”

Sixpence dropped his kerrie. “Neh, my baas. If Sixpence hit, he hit on de kop.”

“But it was dark.”

“Neh, baas, neh. Sixpence barclay Fingo men. Not

hit baas. Baas see black girl, he ask her—she know. Man hit baas, and baas he hit?"

"Yes; I struck him once with a kerrie, and he ran."

"Baas hit one time," Sixpence laughed, and showed a bruise on his back, and a swollen left arm. "Fingo men hit Sixpence one, two, tree, much times."

"By Jove!" said Mark, "doesn't it hurt?"

"You give me sixpence—eh?" said Sixpence, softly.

The coin was handed over and the work resumed, Sixpence singing to himself, and Mark wondering who it was had attacked him. Gradually the pride of construction got hold of him, and as the dam grew he forgot his assailant.

For a week he and Sixpence worked at the dam, and when Sunday came round, Mark spent the afternoon seated on the bank, admiring his work. In the morning he rode over to a little iron-roofed chapel on a flat by itself, with detachments of bush all around that were the advance guard of the Kowie Bush, which stretched away in an unbroken mass to the sea for twenty miles, the home of the bush-buck, the wild dog, and the buffalo still. The congregation went on horseback or in carts. Every one joined in the hymn-singing with great fervour. There was a rousing sermon, varied by the exit of restless boys, who pretended that they had to go out to look after skittish horses; and some powerful extempore praying by venerable farmers. The minister drove back to dinner at the Amners', and in the afternoon every one went to sleep but Mark, whose only desire was to see the dam filled. He was gratified.

It was the very day for a thunderstorm, and Nature held a review. She mustered her forces at first with stately leisure. A white cloud sailed out into the

spacious review ground, that was blue as a forget-me-not, and polished as a looking-glass. The cloud swung up with all sails set, and then signalled by fluttering out a long pennant, and from beyond the offing came the great war fleet, black and lowering, with a fringe of foam where the prows threw back the sunlight. On they came, swift, silent, and majestic, till they shut out one-half the heavens, and the earth below seemed to crouch down with a timid eye upturned. There was a rush of heavy wings, and a flock of blue "sprews" (starlings) flew overhead. A few insects scuttled about, some ants came out of their hills, tested the air with their antennæ, and retired. A gust of wind suddenly swept over the land, caught up the dust, and died away. The clouds came nearer. The air grew heavy and still. A red streak flickered out from the heart of the mass, lighting up vast caverns, and a low rumbling began far down the line, and ceased.

"Humbug!" said Mark, looking at the dam, and then up at the black monsters above, the great war-ships of the sky.

A big warm drop of rain fell on his upturned face, and a few drops splashed around. Then came a low moan as a wandering breath of wind escaped out of a kloof and sought shelter somewhere else. A lizard scurried from a little bush to the refuge of a stone, and a fine eagle went rushing overhead.

"Nonsense!" said Mark, "it's all sham!" and he looked hungrily at the dry bed of his beautiful dam.

The rumbling began again, and was promptly strangled. Then he started as a blinding zigzag of flame flashed downwards to the earth. There was a roar, a flash, another roar more threatening than the first, a sheet of

flame followed by one tremendous clap, and a strange sound like the charge of cavalry. Mark saw the country before him blotted out, the dry veld covered as with a mist; and a second later the water was running out of his boots. He ran, squelching at each footstep, for a little garden shed, and as he ran the lightning darted overhead, and the thunder roared at him in gigantic laughter. As he stood in the shed, looking out, in a wondering state of awe and exhilaration, the water trickled off him into a pool, which ran slowly out at the door, and was then caught up by a rejoicing rivulet that swept round the shed, and went boiling down. There were a hundred such rivulets rushing down the steep valley slopes. The air was, between the crashes, full of the music of running water, and music that swelled and grew into a roar. While Mark stood in the shed he saw a river come into being. The dry slit in which he and Sixpence had worked for a week, was a leaping torrent. The little brown streams that swept down the slopes, clattered like castanets by rattling the loose stones, and the big stream in sport undermined a tree, leapt at it as it fell, and rolled it over and over. Mark laughed. It was grand. There were a thousand things to look at, from the fearful play of the lightning to the earth all alive, and from the leaping streams at play to the vivid belt of blue widening behind the storm-clouds.

Then he saw something marching towards him—a vast army, whose bayonet-points were as a silver shield. On they came, and he was in the glare of sunlight, with the shadow of the storm flying westwards. He stepped out and leaped again because of the blood dancing in his veins, as it danced in the veins of the laughing earth, and

through every nerve of the living things. Such a melody of joy as there was from the throats of birds and insects, and above all from a tremendous orchestra of frogs! Mark had not seen a frog about, or not noticed them, but now they made music enough for a full flock of ewes returning to their lambs. "Back! back!" "Ba-ker-ek! ba-ker-ek!" "Peep! peep!" "Come-catch-me!" "Come-catch-me!" "More-yet! more-yet!" "Peep!" "Ba-ker-ek!"

CHAPTER X

THE OLD BULL

"Halloa! halloa, Clinton."

"Halloa," said Mark, waving a hand to Mr. Amner.

"How is the dam?"

How was the dam? Mark cast an awful glance at his hard work, and then ran splashing through the mud. He had not the heart to speak.

"It's gone, eh?" said Mr. Amner.

It was indeed gone, and as the flood, being no longer fed, sank as quickly as it had risen, in its mad haste to reach the sea, they soon saw that where the bank had been there was nothing but a pile of mud, while the waters had eaten two deep cuttings out of the side of the valley where the furrows were to have been. "How is the dam?" That would be the first question anxiously asked right away in the track of the storm.

"Well, anyhow," said Mr. Amner, "all the sluices will be filled; and don't you worry, my lad. There are very few dams that would have stood against that rush of water, and I haven't seen them myself."

"Perhaps it was because I built it on wrong lincs."

"Not at all. You start on it again to-morrow. Better change your things, and then come down to the lower orchard to me. Some of the trees will need shoring up."

"Better go as I am ; the clothes will dry on me."

"And rheumatism will soak into you. Go and change, lad;" and Mr. Amner went "socking" off through the mud to the lower orchard, where he had put in a thousand young peach, plum, and pear trees. There Mark worked with him till sunset, among such a host of fallen trees and broken branches as would have taken the courage out of many a brave heart. But Mr. Amner came of a tough stock, and his courage rose above disaster. He clapped Mark on the back when the work was done, and they plodded back, with the scent of the earth in their nostrils.

"You're not afraid to tackle the dam again, are you?"

"I'll make the wall wider, with a slope to the top. I've been thinking that it is a mistake to have the deepest part near the bank."

"That's right. The deepest part should be in the centre. Well, take your time over it, but when the job's done I want you to visit the market twice a week."

"Thank you," said Mark, accepting this as fixing his engagement.

"I'll teach you the value of produce, and give me a rest. It's no good raising a thing well unless you can sell it well."

Mark was of the same opinion.

"There are some fellows," went on Mr. Amner, slowly, "who are good till they come to the market, and then they think it is 'small potatoes' to trouble about selling. There's no sense in that."

"No sense at all, sir."

"Well, you finish the dam, and we'll have a talk. If you take your gun to-morrow morning about sun-up, and

go down through the bush yonder, shouldn't wonder if you came across a buck. They'll be on the move after the wet."

"Thank you very much."

"You can get back at breakfast-time."

Mark was up before the sun, and went off full of joy. He returned full of sorrow, with the memory of a clear miss at a dark form bounding over a small bush. It is given to very few to stalk and shoot a buck at the first attempt, but Mark thought that he had badly blundered. As he put his gun in the corner, he saw the prints of muddy boots on the floor which led to a little table where he kept his treasures. The photographs had been overturned, and an envelope lay on the floor. He picked it up. It was the same he had received from Amos, and there was the print of a dirty thumb on it. The letter itself was gone.

He went to the door, and followed the spoor with his eye to where it passed on to the grass. He sat down to breakfast, wearing a worried look, which drew the attention of Mr. Amner.

"Had no luck, eh?"

"It's not that," said Mark.

"Find the work too hard?"

"Oh no. The truth is, Mr Amner, I'm rather fogged. Do you know—do you know—I mean, are there many burglars about?"

Mr. Amner put down his knife and fork. "You've lost something?"

"Only a letter; but that's not it. I may have dropped it somewhere; only there is the mark of a man's footprints in my room, and a week ago—I did not like to say

anything about it—but there was some one at my window, and he struck at me with a stick.”

“What’s that?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” said Mark.

“It matters very much;” and Mr. Amner went to look at the spoor. “Humph!” he said, “white man’s spoor;” and he shouted to the boys to know if they had seen any one about.

They had not.

“Some tramp, perhaps,” muttered Mr. Amner, who was greatly put out. “Are you sure he has taken nothing else?”

They went into the room, and Mark searched about. “No,” he said; “I don’t see anything missing. By Jove! though, yes, the stick.”

“The stick?”

“A rhinoceros’ horn kerrie, that I left up there on the shelf. See, he went there.”

“Was it of value?”

Mark stared blankly at Mr. Amner. “It can’t have been a tramp,” he muttered; “for he has taken a letter as well. It was a letter from Si Amos, and he directly mentioned the stick, and asked me to keep it, as it belonged to his father.”

“I don’t understand. Why should any one want to run off with a letter from Amos to you?”

“It’s a long story,” said Mark; “but I think I’d better tell you.”

“Do you mind the others hearing?” said Mr. Amner; “so I shan’t have to make explanations.”

They went into the sitting-room, and Mark related the whole story of the mystery of the diamonds, bringing it down to the letter from Amos.

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"Then," said Mr. Amner, after a long pause, "you know the fellow who has gone off with your stick?"

"I wish I did," said Mark.

"It's the chap you passed driving a bunch of cattle down here."

"Of course!" shouted Mark. "The man Brent."

"He reached here the next morning. I paid him off, and he went, saying he was going back."

"I should like to get my stick back."

"I'm not so good as I was at tracking, but you can take Sixpence, if you like. Mother will put you up some food, and you'd better take your gun and a blanket. Get ready at once."

Mr. Amner called up Sixpence, put him on to the spoor, and explained what he wanted. The Kaffir ran off to the huts, and reappeared in a couple of minutes, armed with two long kerries.

Mrs. Amner called out to Mark to be careful, as he went off at a trot after the black. The spoor was followed without a stop to the wagon-road, when it ceased; but after a look round Sixpence set off along the road which led down through thick bush to the valley, where the usually gentle stream was swollen into a torrent. A wagon was outspanned on an open glade, and to this Sixpence went.

"White man—where is?"

"What's the fuss?" asked a man at the fire.

Mark looked questioningly at Sixpence, whose ordinarily vacant face was blazing with excitement.

"White man—climb on wagon. Where gone?"

"We are looking for a white man," said Mark. "Have you seen him?"

"Lots of white men about," said the man with a drawl.

"This fellow's a sort of tramp."

The man sipped his coffee with deliberation. "Perlice?" he queried.

"No; but we want the man for thieving."

"So? Well, I gave a ride to a chap this morning. He looked like a tramp, and was a sure enough thief. He went off with my coat."

"Where is he?"

"Well, if I knew where he were, I wouldn't be sitting here swapping jaw. He slipped inter the bush. Follered his spoor for a mile maybe, and then give it up. Going? Well, so long! Say, if you find him, don't plug a hole in my coat; it's the only Sunday-go-to-meetin' I ain't got."

Sixpence had turned off across the grass into the bush, and Mark followed. The ground was greasy, and the spoor was very plain until they mounted a ridge and plunged down into a sea of dusky foliage, threaded only by game tracks and the tributaries of the Kowie River, which has been proudly proclaimed the South African Dart. There is no place so uncomfortable as a game-track through a soaked wood; for what with the drops from the leaves, and the swishing of wet branches, the traveller is exposed to a shower bath. But fortunately they passed at a stride from the wet into the dry, so marked was the edge of the storm-burst, and proceeded with comfort. Mark found himself once more a spectator in the game; but this time the tracker was not Amos. Sixpence seemed to trust more to his hearing and his nose than to the marks on the ground, and also to a sense of direction. He seemed to know the line the thief would take, and he

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went on almost at a run, instead of at the stealthy crawl adopted by the Colonial youth. Once they heard a crash and a snort.

“Buffel!” said Sixpence, dodging behind a tree.

They listened a few minutes, until the crashing was renewed, when Sixpence left the track to search for the spoor of the buffalo. This was found, and traced for a few yards to a depression in the ground where the buffalo had been taking his rest.

“Buhl-banja quei” (very angry); and Sixpence smelt the ground.

“What?” asked Mark, in impatient irritation.

“Ole buhl, vely quei. Much spoor; all same spoor—see?”

Mark did see. There were hoof-marks under one tree enough for a herd of buffalo.

Sixpence cast about, then returned to the game-track, with a regretful look into the black of the forest. Following buffalo-meat was more to his taste than chasing a mean white man.

“Yoh!” he said, and stopped with quivering nostrils.

“What the dickens is the matter now?”

Sixpence looked over his shoulder, and then went on for a few yards.

“Kuik, baas!” And he pointed at the ground.

“Cake be hanged! What is it?”

“Buhl!”

“We are not following the bull, you black idiot!”

“Ja, maar de buhl—him follow dot schelm.”

“The bull followed the thief?”

“Eweh! he stop by dis bush; den he go along suitjes (softly), mawoh; den he run—see?”

Sixpence pointed to the change in the hoof-marks. "He very quei; trow up him tail and roar. The man he jump. He look back. Yoh, he trow him coat away, drop him stick; paas op, baas!" Sixpence's excited comment on the signs to be read in the path rose to a wild yell of warning, and in a twinkle he was up a tree.

Mark heard a snort, a crash, saw something dark hurling itself upon him, and made a frantic leap for a tree-trunk. He swung round, not fully realizing what manner of thunderbolt it was that had been launched against him, and saw a large blue-black animal bunch its feet together to stop its career, and then spin round. He had a wild impression of a dripping black muzzle, a pair of gleaming eyes, and sharp, black, curving horns, with an enormous boss of wrinkled horn on the forehead, the head held defiantly up. The next second he blazed at the animated target with No. 2 shot, and at the terrible roar of pain and fury which greeted his shot, he stayed no more. To his credit be it said that he had not the dazzling fool-hardiness to wait for the charge. He bolted, and the thunderbolt on four legs went like a bolt after him.

"The tree, baas!" yelled Sixpence.

But the mercy of a tree would not have been afforded had not Sixpence, with quick intelligence, dropped his blanket before the bull, who shied violently, then fell upon the blanket with horn and hoof. After having festooned the branches all around with fragments of red wool, he gave his attention once more to Mark, who, thanks to the respite, had managed, after frantic efforts, to swarm up a yellow-wood. The bull glared up at his white captive with blood-red eyes, snorted, and then went down to glare at Sixpence. Then he did sentry-go for an hour,

until he had beaten out a path, which he larded with blood-tinged foam. The small shot had furrowed his face, struck against his horns, and pierced his ears, and little streams of blood trickled over his jet-black nose, to be wiped off by a red tongue. Each time he swept the blood away, the taste of it drove him mad with rage, so that he struck savagely at the saplings in his way, and tore up the earth. After an hour of this exercise he tried strategy, going right away.

“Paas op!” cried Sixpence, warningly, as Mark began to descend.

Mark stayed his descent, and looked searchingly in the direction taken by the bull. Seeing nothing and hearing nothing, he dropped to a lower branch, where he searched the gorse for his gun. Seeing the gleam of the barrels in a patch of fen, he turned round to swing off, when he saw the bull watching him about ten yards off, having made a complete circuit. Mark went up the tree like a squirrel, his nerves badly rattled; but when he got his breath, he thought he would try strategy. One of the branches, spreading out, mingled with the branches of another tree, into which he thought he could climb. So, cunningly leaving his coat to attract the bull's attention, he waited for that wily brute to make the next move. No doubt if it had not been for the smarting of his face, or from a particularly morose disposition, the buffalo, after his second charge, would have cleared off altogether; but his wrong rankled. At any rate, he went off once more into the wood, and Mark shinned across into the other tree, where he made observations. Once more the cunning animal described a circle, but this time Mark saw him approach from behind, with a stillness that was extraordinary in so

large a beast, until he stood in a dark spot, for all the world like a part of the shadow itself. Here he waited, with nothing showing but the red white of his eyes, until his patience was exhausted, when he charged out with a snort, and glared up at Mark's coat. This done, he trotted off to inspect Sixpence, and as he went, Mark slid to the ground and crawled under the ferns. He did not think he had made a noise, but the bull whipped round and dashed back to the yellow-wood tree, round which he paced several times, passing within a few feet of the cluster of ferns. There he stood, and, after a long and trying silence, Mark reached out his hand for his gun, and raised his head to look. Again he thought he had made no noise, but the bull jerked his head round, and glared straight into the ferns. It was touch-and-go; but Sixpence, who had been keenly watching the brute, dropped to the ground, yelled, and bolted for another tree. The bull hesitated a second, but the sight of the running figure was too much, and with a snort he gave chase. When he returned, more furious than ever, Mark greeted him from his perch on a branch with a charge of buckshot, and this time the savage old solitary recognized that he had had enough. He went off at a gallop, and Sixpence immediately descended.

"Has he gone?"

"Eweh. De gun say to him 'Voetsack!' and he loop. By'mby Sixpence come back with baas, und skitt de buhl."

Mark went searching for the rhinoceros' horn stick he had seen, and to his joy found it not far off.

"And now what about following the thief, Sixpence?"

The Kaffir shook his head. "Baas skitt one, two; man hear, vaagloop (run away); no find."

"Do you think the buffalo chased him?"

"Buffel amper (nearly) catch him; trow him stick away, trow him coat, and run."

"Perhaps the man was killed?"

"Goot, so."

"Well, we must go on and see."

Sixpence did not see the necessity, but he took up the spoor, and traced the footsteps to the edge of a small krantz, down which the thief had evidently escaped.

"We can follow, can't we?"

"No good, baas."

"Then we can follow the bull," said Mark, eagerly.

"Yoh. Baas got bullet?"

"Only shot."

Sixpence laughed silently. "Dat schelm buffel. Got no cows; other buhl drive him off. Vely quei. Banja slim. Baas go after buhl; buffel come after baas. Baas skitt and run for tree. No tree; no baas; and Sixpence go huis to, say jong baas jaag (hunt); buffel met klyntje (little) bullets. Ole baas sjambok Sixpence. Ne; no goot."

"I should like to get the beggar," said Mark, with a regretful look into the bush.

"Ja. Kom met honds (dogs) and bullets." Sixpence picked up the coat, and turned back. "Huis to" (to the house), he said, and turned.

They found the man still waiting for the river to go down—still sitting by the fire, drinking coffee out of the same tin. He received his coat, felt in the pockets, and then gave it to his black boy to put in the wagon.

"Got the coat—eh?" he remarked coolly.

"Yes, we got the coat."

"Got his stick too, eh?"

"It is my stick."

"So?" pause and a stare. "Got him?"

"No;" and as the man did not seem disposed to extend the hospitality of the coffee-kettle, Mark went on his way with a very small opinion of this son of the soil. The fact was he had chanced upon a pumpkin-farmer, who had so little to give away that he could not even spare his thanks.

Mr. Amner was very much interested in the story his new chum had to relate, and congratulated him on his partial success, but was concerned about the adventure with the buffalo.

"Those old bulls," he said, "who live alone are the most cunning and savage."

"I should like very much to go after him."

Mr. Amner shook his head. "Not yet, Clinton. You just get on with your dam. I am sorry," he added, "that the thief got off."

"I have been thinking," began Miss Amner, and then paused with a blush.

"Let's hear."

"It seems to me that the man must have heard that Mr. Clinton was coming here," she said, "and then he came with the intention of stealing the letter. He must have expected to find something in the letter he wished to see."

"Perhaps so."

"And I have thought that while he came here, the other man Mr. Clinton mentioned——"

"Wicks."

"That the man Wicks followed Si Amos, and that the two of them will meet to carry out some wicked plan."

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"It may be so, Minnie; but unfortunately we are unable to warn Amos. Is it not so, Clinton?"

"He gave me no address whatever."

"I should be very sorry," broke in Mrs. Amner, "if anything happened to Si; but I don't think there is cause for worry. You don't know anything—you just think."

Miss Amner sighed.

"Besides," added the mother, "Si Amos is as full of tricks as a monkey, and maybe he was pretending all this about diamonds. I don't believe in such nonsense."

"Anyway," said Mr. Amner, "we can't do anything. And Si Amos can look after himself better'n a jackal."

Miss Amner folded her hands meekly, but she asked Mark if he would let her see the stick, and when it was produced she asked leave to polish it.

"Certainly," said Mark; and the girl slipped off shyly with her treasure, to weep over it, after the manner of girls.

But the startling suggestion she had put forward, as to a secret understanding between the two rascals, troubled Mark very much.

CHAPTER XI

THE DIAMONDS AGAIN

He started on the dam next morning, but as he worked he thought of Amos, and thought himself into a state of depression. The "spring" seemed to go out of him; he felt sorry for himself, wondered why he ever left England, and why he had taken to farming. He looked at his hands; they were already getting thicker, with hard callosities at the base of the fingers, and a criss-cross of lines filled in with grime. He had got a pain in his back, a crick in his side. His neck was sore from sunburn, and there was also a sun-blister on the tip of his nose, and a heat-scab on his cheek. His lips were cracked; there were the itching bumps of mosquito-bites on his forehead; and several wretched little ticks had their minute heads buried in his skin. His head ached from the vibration set up by two or three abominable cicada beetles, who were shrilling their love-songs with the energy of a railway engine letting off steam. Where was the charm of existence under such conditions? where was the delight of a wild free life? where was the freedom? where the wildness? He looked up at the blue unflecked sky, at the rolling drab veld with its patches of dark wood, and its round grey grass hills quivering under the blaze of the sun. The sun glared down on him, sucked the moisture

out of his well-fed English body, and tried the temper of his British pluck, as it had tried many others of his kin before.

The new chum was going through his trial, and the ordeal seemed to him very much like a strong attack of the "blues." But it was not merely that. Every youngster and most oldsters who go to South Africa are disillusioned, stripped of their pre-conceived notions as a goose is plucked, and left bare of all enthusiasm, as the country in too many parts appears bare as the palm of a hand. "What a country!" groans the merchant, as he looks out on the dreary Karroo. "What a waste!" he cries, as he sees the grey bare plains of the Orange Colony. "What an inferno!" he again mutters, as he looks out on a nest of black iron-stone kopjes radiating heat. "What a mockery!" as he looks down on a solitary mud-pool in the bottom of a watercourse deep and wide enough to hold the Thames. "What a people!" as he looks with disgust at a group of dirty blacks squatting in the dust. "What a solitude!" as he looks to the far horizon without a sign of life in between. He sighs for the green fields, the changing climate, the cheerful populous hum of England, with the stir of life and all its comforts. Well, he is being tried and proved. Either he will emerge from the test equipped with new ideas to carry on his work in a manner best fitted for the new conditions, or he will remain clothed in prejudice and vain regrets.

The conditions will not adapt themselves to the new chum: he has to adapt himself to the conditions, or to take his place among the "ranks" of the "tired people," who adopt the excuse that it is not seemly for a white man to work when he can pay a black fellow to do the job much worse. In South Africa there have been many

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curious transformations in the law of adaptation. In the white men the eyes become deeper set because of the strong sunlight, the cheek-bones more prominent, the jaws heavier because of the hard "tack;" the men more silent, the women more domestic. Among the Korannas, who live in a dry land where food is often scarce, the womenkind store up vast layers of fat, as do the fat-tailed sheep, on which the body draws for its sustenance in hard times. There was an insect which was well formed and comely until it was threatened with extinction, when it developed joints, and finished up by resembling nothing more than a crooked stick.

Mark thought of England, and longed. A stroll up the Strand held out delights which he never before had imagined, a joy that comes from crowded objects, each with its own shade of interest. Even a stool in an office seemed to him a reserved seat in the stalls compared with the remote position from the world's stage and the world's great actors that he now occupied. He was stranded in the backwaters out of the current, with merely the hum of the great strife reaching him.

He threw his spade down, and looked about him in disgust. Sixpence followed suit, dropped his pick, sat down and lit his pipe.

"Get on with your work!"

"Banja moeg (tired); jest so as baas."

"Speak English."

"Baas tired; Sixpence tired."

"I'm here to look on; you're here to work."

"Ja. White man sit down, black man work. If the white voor osse (front ox) no pull, den zwaart achter osse no trek—see?"

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"If the black hind oxen don't pull they get the whip."

"White man no work; Kaffir no work. Kaffir work one, two, tree day, then roll up him blanket, and when white man cry out at sun-op, 'Hi, Sixpence, op-stan,' Sixpence not. Sixpence gone. White man can work met himself."

"In this country the white man is overseer."

"Aandias."

"The white man is leader, voorlooper;" and Mark made a shot at the Dutch word.

"Ja. Klyn baas say so, daarom goot. Maar de voorlooper loops, not sit down. De voorlooper loops, ja. Baas seen schaaop on de veld, all follow one big kapater (goat). Baas seen span osse on de veld. All follow one ox, ja. The kapater lead, de ox lead, don' sit down. Wilde honde follow one leader, ja."

"Have you ever seen wild dogs, Sixpence?"

Sixpence stood up and pointed. "Congela. When Sixpence a klyntje was, he kom saam met Baas Amos in de bush war de wilde honde jag (hunt) Sixpence. Mawoh! Ek was daarom bang (afraid). Baas Amos he creep in a hole, Sixpence ook (also). Wilde honde kom. Baas Amos make noise like slang. Honde run."

"You knew Baas Amos?"

"Eweh!" and Sixpence softened his voice. "Baas Amos and Sixpence drink from same calabash."

"Did you grow up together?"

"Under de son, ja. Keep the baviaans from de mealies, herd the cows, find de bee tree, ja; but in the dark, no." Sixpence looked around, "Baas Amos go out in the dark when the ghonya calls. Go out in de bush. Talk met de baviaans and de tiger."

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"He used to go out in the night by himself, and talk with the tiger?"

"Ja. Tiger come by the kraal, 'Gurr! gurr!' and Baas Amos creep out de hut. The Kaffir hear one, two tigers. Talk saam met de baviaans, und de cats und de vogels (birds). Baas Amos bang for niets (frightened of nothing). Go quick on de spoor like old Kaffir man."

"Well, get on with your work;" and this time Mark set the example.

For the time the "blues" had passed away. They came back more often than he liked, but each time the attack had less hold. He found there was an art even in shovelling. At first he could not chuck a shovelful of mud beyond a couple of feet; now, with a cock of his right elbow and a sudden jerk, he could send a clod whizzing fifteen feet to the spot where he wished it to stay. He did not see much of the farm while the dam was building. For the time being he was a "navvy," and as night fell he ate his supper and went to bed. The morning after the dam was completed he was called on to take a quantity of the fruit packed in the wagon, and at noon he was trekking to the market, to act as general utility man. In a note-book he pencilled his instructions and commissions. He was to ride into town ahead of the wagon; he was to call on two or three produce-brokers; he was to give a gigantic pineapple to the editor of the next morning's edition, with a view to a flattering paragraph; he was to pay a friendly call on the auctioneer, with a haunch of venison; he was to "match" a mauve ribbon for Miss Amner; he was to buy groceries, to get six yards of red flannel and a length of pink print; and he was to call at the post-office and the bank; he was to

take note of the prices of all live stock and produce sold; and he was also to buy a side of mutton and a three-legged baking-pot.

On the whole he preferred dam-making, but he screwed his courage to the high V.C. level, and made his diplomatic visits to the editor and the auctioneer, with the pineapple and the haunch in his saddle-bags. The editor was very affable, invited him to sit on the corner of the table, and the "market-master" asked him to supper. After sunrise the paper and the wagon arrived together. Mark gave an eye to the print, drank a cup of coffee, opened the paper and found his own name staring him in the face, with a long and particular account of his adventure with the buffalo. It was as if the freedom of the city had been conferred upon him. He was miserable and hot, but notorious. The mayor held an informal court, and introduced him to the resident magistrate, and the citizens introduced themselves.

"Gentlemen," said his worship, with the solemn manner that signalled a joke, "this is the youth the buffalo treed. He saved his skin, and the buffalo skinned his face. He is little less of (s)kin and more than kine, as the poet says."

Mark bore up against the continued assault on his modesty, but his sufferings were abject when he had to submit to the gigglings of the young ladies in the millinery-shop where he tried to match the ribbon. They showed him all colours but the right, and then sweetly suggested that he should match the colour by his cheeks, which were of the colour of beetroot.

He left the town in a dangerous state of mind, ready to assault the first man who offered him a pouch of

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tobacco, which was the way the men began their investigations touching that "buffel" story. Yet the advertisement had proved a great success. Top prices had been given for his fruit, and a man who had owed Mr. Amner 7s. 6d. for a year, insisted on Mark's taking 10s., as preliminary to a long chat in the High Street.

"Your name's Tintop—eh?"

"Clinton."

"So? Well, I knew a chap name o' Tintop. About your size, with same freckle on his nose. Called him Tintop, 'cos he had a silver plate let in his head. Real name were Thomas or James or something? Never yeard of him?"

"No, never," said Mark, emphatically.

"So? Think of that now. You ought to know him. Carried two pipes about with him—one big, t'other small. When he borrowed, he pulled out the big pipe; and he smoked the little one. You ain't got any more buffel yarns to tell?"

"No."

"That's a pity. This yer Tintop could tell a tall yarn, he could. That's so. 'Member one. Buffel chased him in the open, and he took to one of these noisbooms that's got a bunch of leaves at the top, and a stem like a cabbage stick, all pith. Well, that buffel ate the tree down, just nibbled clean through the trunk. Yessir."

"And what became of Mr. Tintop?"

"Oh, him? Well, he were in the bunches—see? So he just hoist the trunk up in the air, and the bunches fell round him like a umberella. That's what. Then he ris up, and walked away. He walked away, that's what he done; and the buffel, thinking the tree were goin' off

by itself, sniffed around best part of a day for Tintop. Yessir; he pawed up most half-acre of ground, searching for Tintop. There was another story he told; but you ain't going?"

"I'm very busy."

"So? Lemme see, I gave you 10s.; an' I owed you 7s. 6d. You give me 7s. 6d., and we'll be quits—eh?"

"I have to give you half a crown."

The man took the half-crown with a puzzled air, and held his palm open.

"You put the half-sovereign 'longside it, so's I can work this thing out."

Mark placed the ten-shilling piece beside the half-crown.

"I see," said the man. "I give you the half-crown. So? Now I owe you five bob. That's right. So long!"

He pocketed the 10s., and went off with a face that beamed with satisfaction, leaving Mark dumfounded by the brilliant calculation.

Mr. Amner was pleased with the result of the marketing, and Miss Amner used the ribbon to suspend a beautiful motto above his bed—a delicate attention on her part, which was often the cause of moments of anguish, for certain inexperienced bees, taking the colour for the flash of gladioli, would dart against the wall, and tumble headlong in the bed, where they got mixed up in the clothing, till the pressure of his body tried their patience to the stinging point.

The dam being finished, he cut furrows down to the orchard, and entered the charmed orange grove where there was shade, and the fragrance of orange blossom, and the refreshing juice of ripe fruit plucked from the

dark shelter of the glistening leaves. Beyond the grove were banana palms, their broad leaves frayed into shreds, their smooth stems gleaming like yellow ivory, and beyond the bananas were a brigade of peach, nectarine, medlar, plum, apricot, and apple trees, with some spreading, untidy figs bordering, and beyond these again was the pine-apple plantation. The soil was black and moist and cool under the shade. The place was quiet, and yet full of life. In the air was the murmur of bees, and the calls of birds, and everywhere there were ants setting about their work with a purposeless fury, grasshoppers chirping, wasps, tremendous fellows, patrolling about.

To him, with his mouth full of juice from a half-baked orange, came Miss Amner, all in white, carrying a box and a butterfly-net.

"Caught me in the act!" he said, with the juice trickling down his chin in evidence.

"Gracious me! never dream of eating those. They are withered fruit, that have remained on the trees since June, when they ripen. I have come to work, and have brought my friends with me. Look!"

He peeped into the box, and saw that it was filled with ladybirds.

"What are they for, Miss Amner?"

"You see those black ants? Now, what would you say they are doing?"

"They hurry up a tree, and then they hurry down again, and then lose themselves."

"I wish they would. They are after sweets, like the bees; but while the bees help the trees, the ants would kill them. Each ant comes down with a drop of sweetness that it has taken from the scale insect, or an aphis,

and those wretched pests suck the life out of the trees. The ants tickle the scale insect—make it laugh, I suppose—and the insect pays toll with a drop of treacle. I believe that at one time the ants used to kill the pests, until the insects learnt the trick of bribing the robbers with that drop of sugary stuff.”

“And what part do the ladybirds play?”

“They eat the scale and the green fly and the black. They and the spiders and the fly-catchers are our best friends.”

“Spiders?”

“See their webs everywhere. There’s a big yellow beauty just above you, with a web like a cotton thread.”

“Ugh! the brute,” said Mark, looking up at a huge spotted spider, with legs about an inch long.

“Oh, he catches thousands of flies. I brought him in from the wood. I breed them too.”

“I thought girls were afraid of those things.”

“They don’t eat girls,” she laughed. “See that brown-winged bird with the black head? That’s the true fly-catcher, and I love him.”

“What’s wrong with the flies, then?”

“They spoil the fruit, of course. We hang bottles on the trees, half full of sugar-water, and trap thousands that way. I collect all the toads I can find, too.”

“What a taste!”

“Well, yes; they have a very fine taste for ants and flies, and the poor bees.” She released a score of ladybirds, which sped like winged jewels into the leafage.

“What’s the matter with your friend the spider?” he said, pointing to the creature, who, with his legs hooked

to the strong fibres of the web, was shaking himself violently.

"It's a horrid wasp. He's afraid of it."

"Afraid of a wasp?"

"Yes; the wasps sting the spiders, make them insensible, and then drag them to their mud cells, lay an egg, and build up the opening. The spider does not die, and when the grub comes out, it lives on fresh spider."

"Why not kill the wasps, then?"

"We must keep up the balance of Nature," she said gravely. "The wasps may do something useful."

"One of them stung young Amos once," he said with a grin.

"Oh, Mr. Clinton," she exclaimed, going pink and then white, "I can't help thinking that Si is in danger!"

"I hope not."

"Of course; but that does not make it any the better for him or for me. I want you to tell me once more the story about the diamonds. But go on with your work."

Mark began digging a furrow round the base of a tree.

"What is that for?"

"To irrigate the tree, of course."

"How funny! If you were thirsty you would not pour the water on your feet, would you?"

"Not unless I were dotty."

"But that's what you are doing to the tree. The tiny network of roots that drink in the moisture are out there below the farthest stretch of the branches, and you should lead the furrow there. Dig down and see for yourself."

He did so, and came upon a bunch of threadlike roots.

"By Jove!—eh? You're a regular dab at gardening."

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"What's a dab?" she asked dubiously.

"A don, you know."

"Please go on with your story."

Mark dug and talked, and made slaps at a horsefly which had a fancy for browsing on his neck. He talked of Si's uncle Futter, of the diamond-broker of Hatton Garden, of Si's belief in the existence of a diamond-mine somewhere "over yonder." Miss Amner sat on an old fruit-basket, and listened with knit brows.

"That's about all there is to it, as Amos would say," said Mark, smashing the horsefly with his spade. "It may be all moonshine, and it may not."

"It is not."

Mark looked at the girl, and she nodded her head. "A Kaffir would not lie to Baas Amos, and when the old Kaffir who was with Si's father spoke about the diamonds, Si knew the diamonds were there to be found."

"It's a big country," said Mark, wisely; "and a man might spend his lifetime looking for a place on chance. But what appears to me very strange is that Si's uncle has not visited the place again."

"He does not know where it is, any more than Si does."

Mark glanced quickly at her, and saw that she was very much excited. Her eyes were sparkling.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Mr. Clinton," she whispered, "there is only one person who knows where the diamonds are."

"And that is——?"

"I; I alone know."

"By Jove!" There could be no doubt that she was in deadly earnest, and Mark caught the excitement. "Where? Tell me."

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"I wish I dared," she said, with a break in her voice. "I feel that I should like to shout it out. Ever since I knew, the secret has been trying to break forth. When any one asks me a simple question, I feel burning to say it."

"All right; tell me."

"I don't think it would be fair."

"I am sure it would. Si himself would tell me."

"But he does not know—he does not know."

"Then if you will not tell me, why did you say so much?"

"Because I had to speak. I just had to, either to you or to my horse."

"It's a pity you didn't tell the news to your horse."

"Mr. Clinton!"

Mr. Clinton did not answer. He was interested in the furrow.

"What pretty manners!" she said.

Mr. Clinton grew very red in the face, perhaps from stooping so much.

"Young men," she said, "very young men are so silly."

Mr. Clinton was sternly silent.

"Oh," she cried, "if I were a man, I would go straight off after the diamonds."

"So would I," he said, lashed into speech by the scorn in her voice.

"Then I was quite right not to tell you," she said triumphantly. "They're not your diamonds."

"That's not fair, Miss Amner. I did not say that I would keep them; and I should be much obliged if you let me get on with my work."

"Very well. If you do not wish to hear where they

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are, that settles the matter;" and she gathered up her skirts, over which the escaping ladybirds were crawling in dozens.

"But you told me you would not tell me," he said, exasperated.

"Pooh! that's just like a man. I came to tell you, of course."

"It's the funniest way of telling that I have heard."

"You're very rude, and now I will not tell you. No; I will wait till Si comes back, and tell him. Don't you think that would be the best?"

Mark snorted.

"I'm so glad you think so," she said brightly. "Then please help me catch these troublesome ladybirds."

Mr. Clinton solemnly chased the ladybirds over the white dress with awkward fingers, while she smiled serenely, as if a heavy secret was not struggling within for freedom.

"Thank you so much," she said, "and also for letting me have the stick. You will find it in your room." She tripped away, with a nod and a smile.

CHAPTER XII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

When Mark went in to his little room to tidy up for tea, he found the horn stick on his bed, with a bit of mauve ribbon round, which he promptly tore off. The stick was beautifully polished, and he put a strain on his politeness to thank Miss Amner for her trouble. The girl was in another mood now, however, and scarcely looked up. Her face was pale, so that her father was troubled.

"I must take you into town, Minnie," he said. "You need a little bright society. There is to be a tea-meeting next week. Shall we go in to that?"

"I don't wish to go," she said.

"But you look tired. It's very dull here for you."

"Her mother has lived here twenty-five years," said Mrs. Amner, "and no one thought she was dull."

"I'm not dull; indeed I'm not. You can sit on the stoep with your pipe. I will leave the door open and play."

She ran away into the "parlour"—a room sacred to all but the minister on his rare visits, and there she played and sang in a little tired voice, that soon showed a trembling in it.

"Shall I try?" said Mark, with a feeling that there was something wrong.

She fluttered into a corner of the room, and he sat

down at the piano, rattling off a few old school ditties and breaking out into "John Peel." It was not much, but it warmed them into speech. Mr. Amner joined fitfully in the chorus, and the dogs, hearing the unaccustomed sounds, thought that the "old baas" must surely be starting on the hunting path, and barked joyfully. Mark, much encouraged, sang a darky song, with a running refrain of "Lou-lou-Lousiana Lou," which had the surprising effect of making Mrs. Amner break first into tears and then into laughter, because it "reminded her so of old Sukey's calf—the one that died."

"I lub you, my honey; yes I do-oo-oo-do-oo," called Mr. Amner out on the stoep, letting his pipe go out—for the first time in the memory of his wife. And the little girl crept out from her corner to sit by his side, with her hand in his big paws.

"Shove her along, Mark; shove her along."

Mark "shoved her along." He banged the astonished old piano till it groaned, and charmed the drowsy ear of night with sweet discord. Sixpence and his loved one, the buxom Nosanna, came up, with a group of awed natives, and exclaimed, "Yinny!" and "Mawohs!" and "Yoh!" at intervals. It was the unusual hour of ten when Mark closed the lid down, and received the thanks of his audience.

"Good night," said Miss Amner. "I'm so glad you can sing so nicely." Then she added, "Be very careful of the stick; it means so much for us all."

"Queer girl!" muttered Mark, as he kicked off his boots. "Awfully queer! What on earth did she mean by that?" He picked up the stick, balanced it, examined it, put it down, and took it up again. There was a

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little roughness on the knob, and he began smoothing it off with his thumb. Then he blew out the candle, and as soon as his head touched the pillow his brain was in a whirl. His brain had a thousand queries to ask. Why had Billy Brent taken that stick? Why did Amos tell him to keep it? What did Miss Amner mean? "I bet you," he said, sitting up in bed, "there's something in that stick."

He lit the candle, and overhauled it again. The roughness was still there—just where the hole had been made to let the haft of a battle-axe in. Some one had been scratching the stick thereabouts. He fished out his wonderful knife, opened a stiletto, and probed at the beeswax in the hole. Out it came, and with it a pellet, about the size and shape of a Martini bullet.

So that was it!

Expecting great things, quivering with excitement, he unrolled the paper. There was writing, but the paper was so crinkled that for some time he was baffled, until the thought occurred to him to make a tracing. This he did with some difficulty, and then he held the tracing up to the light. He expected to come face to face with the secret of the diamonds, but this is what he saw—



What was meant he had not the ghost of a notion. "Baviaan's oog" he interpreted as "baboon's eye," and the animal was probably a baboon. There was also the diamond shape. Beyond that was mystery, but because of the mystery he was convinced he had the secret of the whereabouts of the diamonds, if only he could read it aright.

It was evident no one had been to the trouble of hiding the paper in the stick for fun. The stick had belonged to Mr. Amos, who had discovered the diamonds, but who had been left dead in suspicious circumstances on the veld. The dead man's son had apparently heard that the stick was in some way connected with the diamonds, otherwise he would not have been so careful to impress on Mark the necessity of guarding it. And the man Brent had stolen the stick. Yet if Si Amos believed that the secret was held in the stick, why didn't he examine it? and why, above all, did Mr. Futter, who was most anxious to keep the secret to himself, part with the stick? These thoughts passed through the mind of Mark as he sat on his bed, puzzling over the cryptic message from the dead man.

Finally, without any special reason for doing so, he returned the pellet to its hiding, restopped the hole, and placed the tracing he had made in his purse. Then he went to bed, hoping that in the morning the puzzle would be read by Miss Amner, who evidently, from her words, had interpreted the meaning.

He did not see her before breakfast, but when the meal was over she asked him if he would bring over a bag of meal from the store-house, as she wished to bake a batch of bread in the new three-legged pot he had

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bought. He shouldered the bag and staggered off to the kitchen, where she awaited him with her sleeves rolled up.

Then he took out the tracing and laid it before her. "Will you tell me what it means?"

"You found it?"

"I did; and I should like very much to know how you came to discover it, and then to understand what the thing means."

"It seems so wonderful, so strange. I can't explain how it was. I thought there was some secret locked up in the stick, and I found it. And to think that it was nearly lost!"

"But what does it mean?"

"Haven't you guessed?"

"All I can make out is that there is something about a baboon."

"You're getting hot," she laughed.

"So is the pot. But the pot is about as wise as I am. I give it up—really."

"It means, of course," she said, with rising colour, "that the diamonds are to be found under a square-topped hill called Baviaan's Kop, or Baviaan's Eye. 'Oog' means 'eye.'"

"And what does 'droogte' mean?"

"'Drauchter;' that's the way to pronounce the word!"

"Well, what does 'drauchter' mean?"

"'Dry.' The veld is dry, do you see? and the Baviaan's Hill must be in the Karroo somewhere."

"Somewhere," said Mark, dubiously. "But the Karroo is a big place."

"I never was there," she said. "But, however big, there cannot be many square-topped hills called after

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baboons. I don't know what 'reenboog' means, but 'aftkoms' means 'to come off,' and 'regs' means 'right.' So, you see, you were to come off the hill to the right, and the diamonds will be found just there."

"By Jove!—eh? That seems all right!"

"Of course it does. Now, what is to be done?"

"Have you a map?"

"The first thing I did was to look at the maps; but I could see no trace of a Baviaan's Kop. There's a 'Tiger's Kop,' and a 'Rhenoster Kop,' 'Quagga's Kop,' 'Olifant's Hoek,' and all sorts of places named after animals. You must go to the library in town, and look at the map there."

"And then——"

"Then you must wait till Si comes back."

The next time Mark went into town with a load of produce—this time, lucerne for the town cows—he spent an hour at the library, poring over maps. The result of his search was to shake his faith in Miss Amner's reading of the place. There were "Baviaans" in numbers, hundreds of miles apart, and he saw at once, that if he and Amos set out to search for diamonds under every table-topped hill that was named after the baboon, they would grow grey in the enterprise. By the aid of a Dutch dictionary he found that "reenboog" was "rainbow."

"A rainbow appears after or during a thunderstorm," mused Miss Amner, when he told her; "but one could not be expected to wait near a hill for a storm to come along."

"Scarcely," said Mark, fervently, "especially as I am told that, in the dry country, it frequently happens that rain does not fall for a year."

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“Perhaps it is merely put in for luck. ‘A rainbow at night,’ you know, ‘is a shepherd’s delight.’”

That suggestion, however, brought them no nearer the solution, and gradually the great discovery lost its power. Mark spent three weeks running up a wire fence, planting out trees, and breaking up new ground. It was work that made bed a comfort and sleep a necessity. There was scarcely a night when he was not sound asleep at nine, and not a morning that he was not up at half-past five, when his regular habit was to take a dip in his own dam, now full.

“Letters from England, Clinton,” said Mr. Amner, one morning, and once more the mystery came to the front.

One was from his father. That he read first. There were two others, both readdressed from the post-office, Grahamstown. They were as follows:—

“DEAR MR. CLINTON,

“On the eve of your departure, I instructed my man to send you a stick from my collection. I have just discovered that he, in error, sent, in place of one I had selected, another which I am very loath to part with indeed. I should be very much obliged if you would deposit the stick, which is of rhinoceros’ horn, with the manager of the Standard Bank, Grahamstown, who will return it to me; and I should be very glad if you would use the enclosed amount to purchase some other object. With good wishes for your success,

“I am, yours faithfully,

“S. FUTTER.”

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"DEAR SIR,

"Reverting to the conversation I had with you in my office, I beg to inform you that Mr. F. has left for the Cape. As you were in communication with his nephew, it is very probable that you will receive a visit from the gentleman. I need scarcely suggest that you should be on your guard. In the event of anything arising which would give you a line as to his movements, I should, on the receipt of a cable message containing the words, 'Carbon, London,' wire £50 to your credit to the Bank of Africa, to enable you to complete the investigation.

"Yours obediently,

"F. GOODCHILD."

He read the letters through twice, and laughed uneasily.

"I'm blest if I know what they mean!" he burst out; "but I don't like it. Hang it all! I'm not a detective!"

"Anything wrong?" asked Mr. Amner.

Mark handed over the letters, and the farmer read them through.

"So, I see they refer to a matter you spoke about—in connection with young Amos?"

"Yes."

"Is it any business of yours?"

"Not unless I choose to mix myself up in it."

"Then don't choose, my lad. Here are two men, probably hard, clever men, playing against each other for high stakes, no doubt. By some accident you have entered into their plans. They would use you for their gain, not for yours, and toss you aside. Give the man

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his stick back, and have as little to do with the business as you can."

"But the stick belonged to Si's father."

"That gives you no hold over it. It can be of no value to you except as a stick, and a stick you can replace. Return the stick, and have no more to do with these men. That is my advice."

Mr. Amner returned the letters, lit his pipe, and went off to his seed-house to pot off some young plants. Mark spanned in a couple of oxen to the rake, and spent the morning "scoffling" the mealies; but as he went up and down, loosening the earth, his brain was busy with the letters. Mr. Amner's advice was, no doubt, very sensible, but it seemed to him to be colourless. He sniffed a plot, and the scent excited his blood, fired his imagination. Mr. Futter had left England, and yet he had said nothing about his journey in the letter. That was suspicious in itself, but what could be more suspicious than his suddenly awakened interest in that stick, just about the time when it was possible for him to have received a hint from Brent or Wicks that the stick was of importance. Having worked that out, Mark came to another conclusion, which was this—that Mr. Futter did not know where the diamonds were to be found, and hence could not have known of the concealed paper.

He agreed with Mr. Amner that he ought to return the stick. There was no excuse for him to keep it. The question was whether he should return it intact, or with the paper abstracted.

Mark's schoolboy honour was of the brightest. He had not been in the world long enough to learn that men, as they grow old, can give a reason to themselves in

excuse for departing from the rigid code of the "sixth form." His honour prompted the return of the present as it was given him, let what would come; and as he thought over the matter through the long day, his reason sided with his principle to act square.

If Mr. Futter did know of the existence of the roll of paper, then, in finding it still in its place he would have no ground for suspicion. If he did not previously know of the hiding, but discovered it, he would naturally assume that no one else had found the hidden plan.

In the course of his next visit to market, Clinton duly deposited the stick in the custody of the bank manager, a very courteous gentleman, who invited his visitor into his room, and showed a kindly interest in his affairs.

"And do you like the life, Mr. Clinton?"

"Very much indeed."

"I am glad to hear that. Every fresh settler in the district is a possible client, that is, presuming it is your intention to settle in Lower Albany."

"I think so. Mr. Amner has offered me a share in a new orchard he is opening up."

"Then you have a very exceptional chance. No doubt you will accept the offer."

"There is no hurry. You see, I agreed to remain with him for a year on the present arrangement."

"A year—eh? Well, we shall be glad to make you an advance when you enter into the share system with Mr. Amner. If Mr. Amner is satisfied, that is enough for us."

Mark was grateful; then his eye fell on the stick, and he wondered whether there was anything underlying the manager's friendly interest in his affairs.

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"I suppose," he said, "you will be sending that stick to Mr. Futter by post?"

"Ah! no doubt, no doubt. Good morning, Mr. Clinton, and be sure and call next time you are here."

Mark went off in a brown study, with a little hardening of the mouth. What could it matter to the bank manager whether a farm pupil remained in the district or not? Had Mr. Futter already put in an appearance, and prompted the manager to ask a few questions, which, to the manager himself, would appear quite innocent, but which would show that Futter himself was uneasy as to Mark's intentions. He stood to let a wagon go by, and his attention was arrested by the colour of the oxen—a well-matched "vaal" span.

"Halloa, Robey!"

"Whoa-ow-ow-whoa!"

The oxen halted, and Robey held out a big hand, after which he produced a pipe and his twaak-sack.

"What have you been doing all this time?"

"Riding," which is the wagon language for carrying goods.

"Are you busy now?"

"Not so busy."

"I say, Robey, could you do a little service for me? You know that horn-stick I had? Well, I want you to watch the bank there, and see if a man comes out with it. Take note what sort of man he is, and where he goes."

"Waaroms?"

"Why, well, because—— Look here, Dave, would you like to do Si Amos a good turn?"

"Ja, and you too."

"Well, this man I want you to watch for is not a good friend of Si's; and I wish to know what he is about."

"That is a child's story."

"So it is; but I will tell you more when we see Amos again. I can only say it is for his good."

"Ja, I will watch. I off-load a box next door, and you will find me there. Trek!" The oxen put their shoulders to the yokes, swayed about a little, and the wagon crawled on a few yards to pull up alongside the curb. It was a slow job off-loading that one box, and took Robey three hours, half of which time he sat on the box as it lay in the pathway. Such well-considered laziness was a little unusual, but it attracted no attention. In the afternoon, when Mark turned the corner, Robey whipped up his span, and went off at a smart walk.

"What's the hurry, Dave?"

"Ride, and wait for me by the toll-house. Trek, you slegte England, you lelerke Scotland!"

Mark rode on at once. A month ago he would have stopped to find out the meaning of this brusqueness, but now he was ready to act on the slightest hint. He rode slowly out of the town to the toll-bar, where he prepared for a long visit, but the "vaal" span were hungry, and came along at quite four miles an hour. Robey passed on to the "outspan," and built his fire before he talked.

"Two men," he said, oracularly, "can watch—see?"

"Of course they can, Dave."

"Ja; the jackal can watch the wolf, and the wolf can watch the jackal—see?"

"Did some one watch you?"

"Me or you—see? A man came out with that stick."

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"What kind of man?"

"A kaal-faced man, with swaat hair over the eyes."

"'Kaal-faced,' clean-shaved!"

"Ja. He came by me. Saag hij, 'What are you doing here all day?' I say, 'I am off-loading.' Saag hij, 'I saw you talking to young Clinton.' 'Ja,' I say, 'he want to buy my oxen.' So he look at me sideways, 'What is your name?' saag hij. 'My name is Robey; and yours?' 'My name is Van Snaar.' 'Do you buy oxen, Van Snaar?' I say. 'No,' he says; 'I buy esel.'"

"He buys donkeys—eh? And then——?"

"And 'toe.' 'And Clinton,' he says, 'wanted to buy your oxen? Is he then a farmer?' 'No,' I say, 'he is a rooineck.' So he laughed, and went off, looking at the stick very close. By'mby he come back, and go in by the brandy-shop to look out the window. That's why I say to you 'Go on,' for he was watching."

"And he was a clean-shaved man, you say? English or Dutch?"

"Perhaps English, perhaps Dutch."

"Did he follow your wagon?"

"A little way; so I went on by the Bay road—see? so he would think I was not going your way. Then he walked back, and after a time, when I was still on the Bay road, he drove up in a cart, him and another man."

"A man with a big black beard?"

"No; a little sandy beard."

"Is that all?"

"There is more."

"Well——"

Dave ladled coffee into a pannikin, emptied this into the kettle, and mixed it by pouring the contents out and in.

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"There was more." He took a sip, and cut off a junk of bread, which he dipped in the coffee. "There is a beaker."

"Thanks, Dave;" and Mark helped himself from the kettle.

"Ja. They pulled up and waited for me. 'Robey, are you ready for business?' 'Ja, Van Snaar.' 'See, here,' he says, 'I want to hire a wagon and span for six months. What are your terms?' 'Half down,' I says. 'Half down,' he says, 'and the balance at the end.' 'Where to, Van Snaar?' 'That is my business, Robey.' 'Is it good veld?' 'Good enough,' he ses. 'Name your price.' 'If the veld is poor,' I ses, 'and water skeerce, I would ask £400.' 'Meet me in the town,' he ses, 'on the market, the third morning from now.'"

"Yes."

"That's all."

"You are to meet him on the market square in three days' time to become his servant."

"For £400. If the oxen die and the wagon is lost, it will pay me. But I would not like to lose my moooi oxen. No; that is true."

"I don't like it, Robey."

"Waarom?"

"Well, I don't."

"So? You know Van Snaar, maybe?"

"I do not."

"You will, maybe, pay me £400?"

"How could I, Dave?"

Dave humped his shoulders. "It is child-talk again."

Mark was uneasy. He knew there must be some connection between Van Snaar and Futter, and that

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probably the wagon was to be hired for a trip to the Baboon's Kop.

"Look here, Dave, will you hold off the bargain until I have seen Van Snaar, as he calls himself? I ask you for the sake of Amos. There are men working against him, and I am sure you would not like to help them."

"Would Amos give me £400?"

"Yes, he would—if he knew what I know."

"And what do you know, Clinton?"

"That I cannot tell you yet."

Robey sipped his coffee and soaked his bread. "I don't like Van Snaar; but still that money—I am poor."

"I will give you something in advance. Here is £10;" and he took out the note he had received from Mr. Futter.

"What is that for?"

"To bind you to me and Amos; to hire your wagon and oxen when we want them."

"All de world! You also will go on a journey?"

"Yes; and if it succeeds, it would be worth to you more than £400."

Dave shook his head. "It is daarom strange, but I don't like Van Snaar."

"Then you agree?"

"It is foolish. But I agree."

"Thank you, Dave; but you will see this man all the same, and fix it so that I can see him?"

"Right. I will be here two nights from now, and you can climb in the wagon—see? So long!"

"So long!" said Mark, jumping on his horse, and going off at a canter, which he kept up until the night grew too dark for any gait but a brisk walk. He arrived

at the farm about ten, put his horse in the stable, cut up a bundle of forage by the dim light of a lantern, and then sought his room, where supper was always left for him if he were late. Supper was what he thought of, but to his disgust he found no sign of it, beyond an empty plate; but, if there was no supper, there was on the table an old battered hat, and on the floor a pair of worn boots. From the boots his eyes went to the bed, and rested on a mop of unkempt hair. The face of the intruder was covered by the sheet, from under which came strangled breathing.

"Well, if this doesn't beat all!" muttered Mark; then angrily, with a jerk at the bedclothes, "Come out of that!"

The sleeper grunted and turned over. He had been careful to get into Mark's very best suit of pyjamas—a piece of audacity which was the greatest crime of all.

"Here, you!"—shake.

"Halloa!"—yawn.

"Halloa yourself! What do you mean by this?"

"Oh, don't bother! I'm sleepy."

Mark caught the offender by his ankle and jerked him to the floor.

"There now!"

The intruder picked himself up; but instead of showing fight, calmly crawled into bed, and drew the clothes about him.

"I say, don't you know me?"

Mark caught up the lantern, and threw the light on to the other's face.

"You? It's you again!"

"It's me, sure 'nuff."

"Amos, by all that's wonderful!"

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Amos yawned, and snuggled down, his eyes blinking sleepily.

"See you" (yawn) "in the morning;" and he was asleep.

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Mark. Then, softly, "Same old Amos!" then, "Poor beggar!" the last as he saw how much the returned wanderer was like the poacher as he was first known to him, with the same pinched cheeks and signs of extreme hardship. He sat up for a little time, waiting to see if the last riddle would be unsolved by the awakening of the sleeper, and then he "pegged" out on a kaross on the floor. He did not sleep much, and if it had not been for the fear that in the morning there would be no trace of his visitor, he would have sought a softer couch in the stable loft.

In the morning at cockcrow, which was his clock, his eyes, opening, at once encountered the stare of a pair of brown eyes from the bed.

"Mornin', farmer!"

"Morning, rag and bones!"

"Got a nice crib here? I guess a girl put them ribbons up."

"Where have you been, Amos?"

"Over yon—der. I say?"

"Well."

"Could you lend me a pair of boots? Must be gettin' on."

"No, I can't."

"So? Well, it don't matter. I can go barefoot easy. Nice road." Amos put his feet to the floor; they were inflamed and swollen.

"How did you find me out?"

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"Don't fear. I ain't goin' to stay. I yeard you were here, and looked in last night; seein' the hut empty, I crep' in."

"And where are you going?"

"Me? Goin' bee-huntin'. Couldn't lend me a needle and cotton, could you?"

"I couldn't."

"So? Well, it were mean to eat your supper; but it just went before I knew." He got into his worn clothes, pulled on the boots with a wince he could not disguise, and stood up, looking at the wall with a curious smile on his lips. "Right smart, I call it. Well, so long!"

"Sit down," said Mark, fiercely.

The brown eyes that had been restlessly roaming over the room met the light blue eyes in a steady glance, and the two shook hands.

Amos sat down with a groan, and Mark drew off his boots.

"You will stay here, Si?"

"I guess so, Mark."

Mark went out, closed the door behind him, and went straight to Mr. Amner with the news.

"You'll let him stay, won't you, sir, till he is strong enough? He can have my bed."

Mr. Amner said nothing, but went to the room. "Morning, Si. Clinton has asked me to let you stay till you mend. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothin'. Guess I can clear out by to-night."

Mr. Amner stroked his beard. "Next week I meant to inoculate some young beasts. Think you could do the job?"

Amos nodded his head.

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"Very well," and Mr. Amner went off to his women-folk. "Mother, there's some one in Mr. Clinton's room wants feeding up. Clinton, I want you down at the kraal."

They walked together towards the kraal. "Did you bring Amos home with you last night?"

"No, sir. I found him in my room."

"And what brought him here?"

"He told me he was going bee-hunting."

"That's like him. Well, don't let him unsettle you. He's a rolling stone. A good-enough chap, and clever in his way. But it isn't my way—nor yours. Did you give the stick up?"

"I did, and it was taken away by a man who called himself Van Snaar. I think there is something queer about the matter, and I want you to let me go into town again this week to see this man."

Mr. Amner fidgeted. "Does Amos know anything about this?"

"I have not told him. I think this Van Snaar is Mr. Futter, Amos's uncle, and if it is, then it is certain that he is trying to do Amos out of his right."

"I don't follow the reasoning. Go into town, act cautiously. Best say nothing to Si until you return."

"Very good, sir."

So Mark bottled up his great secret, and persuaded Miss Amner to say nothing,—a decision which was judicious, as any undue excitement might have thrown the patient into a fever. A patient he was of the order that was dear to the kindly heart of Mrs. Amner. He required "feeding up," and she set about the task with a bustling enthusiasm that made light of calves'-foot jelly, beef-tea,

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buchu tonic, bran-and-brandy poultices for the stomach, liniments for the swollen feet, and a "basin crop" for the hair. Mark presided at the cropping after breakfast, when the patient was bonneted with a large yellow basin, and the locks that straggled beneath the rim were clipped. Amos took his gruel and the lotions, together with a very large dose of counsel, with stolid equanimity, and for a very long time he resisted all efforts to drag from him the reason of his long absence. In the evening, however, when they were all together, by little shreds and patches which they pieced together, he gave an outline of his adventures, from which it appeared that he had been across the midlands into the Western Karroo, where he was robbed and maltreated by a band of Boer banditti, who still lurked in those vast wastes. His companion, an old Kaffir servant who had often accompanied his father on his hunting expeditions into the Kalahari, had been killed. From that point he had begged his way from farmhouse to farmhouse, often sleeping out without any cover, and frequently passing a whole day without any more sustenance than he could gain from the root of the insangi or the fleshy leaves of the "oliphant's bosh."

"Bless the boy!" said Mrs. Amner. "What did you expect to find?"

"I set out to find a big water-melon, and I guess I picked up one of these bitter pumpkins."

"Get away, do! You never went searching for a water-melon."

"Well, mum, it's all the same. I've given up chasin' the moon, an' I'm goin' to settle down to work."

Mark glanced at Miss Amner, who went as near achieving a wink as it was possible.

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Later on, when they were together in the room, Amos volunteered the information that he had gone off on a hunt for the diamonds, because of a slight clue given him by the old black man who had lost his life.

"Why did you mention the stick in your letter to me?"

"Well, I'll tell you. But where is it? I ain't seen the thing about anywhere."

"It's all right," said Mark, hesitating.

"You've not lost it, have you?"

"Well, no; but it was stolen by Brent."

"Thunder!" said Amos, starting up. "Then there must have been something in what the old chap told me. He said my father told him that if anything happened to him the stick was to be given to me, with a message that it was more than it seemed. I've been thinkin' of that all along. Have you got the stick?"

"I took it into town, old chap; but it's all right, and I'm going in about it to-morrow.

"And that chap Brent stole it—eh?"

Mark related the incidents of the chase after the thief, mentioning, of course, the part played by Sixpence.

There was a soft knock at the door, and the black boy himself appeared. No doubt Amos was very pleased to see his old playmate, but if so he did not look it, but with Sixpence it was otherwise—the big, strapping Kaffir was as pleased as a dog who meets his master after a long absence. He spoke in a soft girlish voice, with one hand over his mouth, and only answered when Amos flung him a word or two, but when he withdrew and had gone some distance into the night, they heard his deep voice booming out a song of praise.

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"You seem to treat your old chum rather coolly," said Mark.

"Oh ay. It is the chief's way."

"A fine-looking chief you are!" said Mark.

Amos yawned, and, to Mark's delight, forgot his interest in the stick.

The next afternoon Mark saddled up, and rode off on a journey which was to break up his peaceful life.

CHAPTER XIII

PREPARING FOR A TREK

David Robey was at the outspan with his wagon, having on board a load of pumpkins, which he was taking into market for a relative on whose farm he was allowed, when he was in the district, to give his beloved oxen a run.

"Daag, neef," he grunted from his seat on the little water-fatje.

"Daag, Dave," rejoined Mark, in the language of the road, which he now used for the small change of conversation. "Any change in the plans?"

"Leave your saddle in the toll-house, and pay him sixpence to keer for your horse. Then get in the wagon under the half-tent."

"Oh, is that the idea?"

"Ja. In the morning Van Snaar will come to the wagon, and you can then see him."

"All I want is to see the man."

"And toe."

"And I should like you, if you can, to find out in what direction he intends to trek, and if he turns out to be the man I think he is, to decline his offer without rousing his suspicions."

"If he is your man, you must give me a sign. See,

I will let a rheim hang out of the eyehole up there in the half-tent. If he is your man, draw the rheim in, and I will know."

Dave sold his pumpkins on the morning market; delivered them at the houses of half a dozen purchasers, and then returned to the market-place. Scarcely had the wagon drawn up, when Mark saw through the peep-hole a Cape cart with its white hood up drive round, and halt with its back to him. Two men got out, shook hands with Robey, and then filled their pipes. One of them examined the oxen, the other remained.

"So, Robey, you were playing with me the other day," said this man slowly.

"How so?"

"You told me you did not know young Clinton, and he travelled with you from Port Elizabeth up with a friend."

"Ja, Amos."

"Well, why did you try to keep me in the dark?"

"This wagon is mine; the oxen also. I go where I like, and take with me who I like—see?"

"Oh, it's all right, Robey—quite right; but I wanted to see Clinton, and you put me off his track."

"I have no truck with other people's business."

"But this is your business."

"How so, Van Snaar?" and he shifted so that Van Snaar should face the tent.

"My business is your business, and when I engage you for £400 I don't want other people to know my plans."

"What can a boy like Clinton do to your plans?"

"He can talk—see? I came to you because I heard

you were a man with a close tongue, and I don't want my plans spoilt at the start. That's why."

Mark saw the man's face—a square, clean-shaven face with a heavy chin, and thin, savage-looking mouth. He could see in it no likeness to Si's uncle Futter, and the voice was not the same. His hand was on the rheim, but he did not draw it in.

"I want a still tongue, Robey, verstan?"

"So?"

"And oor jij, Robey; if my people serve me well, I deal with them well. You must say nothing."

"That is easy. I know nix."

The other now joined them. "The oxen are all right," he said; "but I should like to look at the wagon."

Robey glanced up, and saw the rheim disappear. It was the sign at last. Mark had recognized in the second man the shifty features of Mr. Sam Wicks.

"You want to see the wagon—eh?"

"Yes; it must be fit for a heavy journey."

"This journey. Where and how far—eh?"

"You will learn in good time."

"Is the veld sour or sweet, karroo or bush veld, red grass or no grass? Are the roads good? is there water in plenty?"

"You will learn all that in time."

Robey laughed. "I never yet went on a trek without knowing how the veld was. I want to know for my oxen. They will not talk."

"Karoo veld," said Van Snaar.

"So? karroo veld. You will go west—eh? I don't know the country."

"I know it. You need not trouble."

"You said six months. Two months going, and two coming back, with maybe two months for rest—eh? That would be near on to four hundred miles."

"I will examine the wagon," said Wicks, impatiently.

"Hold still, kerel. Four hundred miles. I am thinking. That would mean across the Karroo to the Orange River. It is dry trekking across the Karroo, daarom bad for the oxen."

"We offer you £400."

"I have heard there are bad men by the Groot Rivier, and there is no grazing, and water is skeerce."

"What do you want?" burst out Van Snaar, causing Mark to start violently. "More money, I suppose?"

"Say, kerel, you can leave the wagon alone."

"What's that? I must examine the wagon to see if it is fit."

"Ja; but I am not going—see?"

"How much?" asked Van Snaar.

"Nix much. I am bang—see? Bang voor the oxen, bang voor my skin. There is no water, no grass, and there are bad men."

"You are a fool, Robey. I have been over the whole ground with wagons before, without losing a single ox, and there are no bad men."

"Well, the Karroo is not my country. I don't like it—see? That is my word."

"Come," said Van Snaar, "you are not going to play with me. I have lost three days over you, and by—you will come."

Robey laughed. "Tell me," he asked.

"I will give you £500," said Van Snaar, after a word with his friend.

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"Done. Pay me the money, and the wagon and oxen are yours as they stand, when I have left my things at the hotel."

"We want you as well. Dave Robey is reckoned the smartest karwyer (wagon-conductor) in the country, and we want him."

"That is not to be. Climb off!" This to Wicks, who had mounted on the back rail.

"There is some one inside," said Wicks.

Dave grabbed him by the leg, and jerked him off. "Look here," he said, his lazy eyes kindling into fire, "I am not for sale—see?"

"Who is inside?" asked Van Snaar, narrowing his eyes.

"Perhaps his wife," said Wicks, with a leer.

"Or Clinton," said Van Snaar.

Robey took off his coat, and rolled up his sleeves. Wicks jumped into the cart. Van Snaar slowly followed, took the reins from the Hottentot driver, then shook his head at Robey. "You will be sorry for this, Robey," he said, and drove off.

"There goes £500," said Robey, looking after the cart. "Yon inside, are they your men?"

"Yes, Dave, they are."

"Well, keep dark. They are round the corner, and, they have stopped; they drive on. There is mischief done, Clinton."

"I am awfully sorry, Dave."

"Hold still; I am thinking."

Mark, feeling very excited, kept quiet while Robey pondered. "I have a plan," he said. "They have put down some one to watch us, maybe the Hottentot. Well,

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I will drive on the road they took, and you keep watch. I will then go out on the Fort Beaufort road, and outspan till dark on the flat. If any one follows, we can then make another plan. Verstan?"

"Yes."

"Trek?" shouted Dave, and the wagon creaked off through the town, with Mark inside the tent, keeping watch through the peep-hole. Dave pulled up at a shop, where he bought some groceries, which he placed in the tent.

"Seen any one?" asked Mark.

"Ja; Hottentot other side the road. Trek voor!" and the wagon went on up the broad main street, while Mark, swaying inside, endeavoured to keep his eye on a coloured man, who appeared to be taking notice of everything but the wagon. They turned down the High Street, crossed the railway line, passed through the cemetery, skirted the Hottentot quarters, and in an hour were on the flats. Robey kept on for a mile or so, and then outspanned.

"Has he followed us, Dave?"

"Ja; he sits over there."

"What is to be done?"

"I have a plan. You keep hid, and when it is dark the Hottentot will creep near. I will give him a supje of brandy, and you will drop out, and go back. In two hours you will reach the toll-house, where your horse is. Will that do?"

"As far as I am concerned, yes; but what about yourself. I should like you to bring your wagon to Burnt Kraal, if you can do so without being followed."

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"I will follow this night, by a short cut. It is a bad path, but the wagon travels light, and I will reach Burnt Kraal by sun-down to-morrow."

"That's good of you, Dave."

Mark sweltered under the tent through the long afternoon in an atmosphere that grew stifling; but he had the patience to bear with it. At sunset the oxen were driven in and secured to the trek-chain. He waited anxiously for the sign. There was silence for nearly an hour, then he heard Robey's deep voice.

"Come near, kerel. Will jij brandy drink?"

"As 't bliff, baas."

"Come, sit; it is lonely here."

"Danke, baas! Baas has no mate?"

"No, kerel, and you also. I think I saw you over on the road—a stranger—eh?"

Mark was out of the wagon, and softly stole away to the road, when he stepped out briskly on a six-mile walk to the toll-house, not particularly pleased with the part he had played, yet with his mind excited by the discoveries he had made. A couple of miles beyond the toll he stopped at a roadside inn. There was no one about, so he took his horse to the stable himself, and was searching around for a sickle to cut up a bundle of forage, when he stopped to see whether he could tell from the horses in the stable what company the inn held; as by this time he was familiar with most of the horses in the district, and their owners. There were only two horses, and they were strange to him. He passed on to an empty stall, when he heard voices, and crouched under the manger.

"I tell you he must come this way. Didn't you hear

what the innkeeper said, that he rode towards town last night, and that he has not seen him return?"

"Then, what will you do?"

"Watch, you fool!"

"And then——?"

"Make him talk. I must find out exactly how much he knows."

"I don't see what harm he could do, since you know the way, and we'd have the start."

"I don't know the way, my friend. The search must take some time, and I won't have another party following my tracks."

"Take my advice. Wait till we get up in the back country, where there are no police, and, if they follow, why so much the worse for them. I don't like police."

"You are a mean cur, Wicks."

"I can take a risk with any man; but I don't see any sense in this plan. You come to this inn; you make inquiries about a certain person, and if anything happened to him, suspicion would follow us at once. What then—eh?"

"There is sense in that."

"Of course. Much better catch them in the Karroo country. People get lost there, and no one hears about them. They could die of fever or thirst," Wicks chuckled.

"Stop it!"

"Halloa! why, what's the matter with you?"

"It's the old trouble," said the other, hoarsely. "Touch of fever from the night air."

"It's thunderin' dark," growled Wicks. "Much better off inside!"

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"Go in, then," said the other, walking off to the road, which was lined by tall blue gums, whose interlacing branches deepened the shadows thereabouts.

"Was badly skeered," muttered Wicks, "but doesn't want to show it!" He stood for a few moments, then went back into the inn.

As the door shut on him, Mark's horse inquired for his meal. He put his muzzle over the partition and whinnied, whereon the other two horses fidgeted. Mark crouched, with straining ears, and for months after, whenever he heard the hum of the wind in the blue-gum leaves, he experienced a feeling of discomfort. In South Africa the most common sound in the country at night is the bark of a dog. Far away down in the lowland bush country, some unhappy cur, with fears of a prowling leopard, was yapping frantically. Then the horse whinnied again, wondering why his master was so long with the forage; and out of the shadows came Van Snaar to the stable door. The three horses turned their heads to look at him.

"Halloa, inside!"

The inn door opened. "What's the row?"

"Have the horses been fed?"

"Ja, two bundles each. Why?"

"They seem uneasy. Bring a light."

"You'll find the lantern above the door. Light it yourself."

Van Snaar felt for the lantern, fumbled with the slide, and searched in vain for a match. Then, with an impatient exclamation, he strode across the yard, swinging the lantern, and Mark slipped out at once. He knew it was a time for prompt movement. As the door closed on

Van Snaar, he had picked up his saddle and unloosened the head-rope. When the door was opened, and the light from the lantern shot across the yard, he was at the gate. Under cover of the men's voices, he led his horse down the dark avenue to an open outspan on the hill-top. Here he saddled up, mounted, and rode off—first at a walk over the grass, and then at a canter. He reached Burnt Kraal at sun-up, rubbed down his horse, gave him a full manger of oat-hay, and went to the kitchen, where Nosanna was making the early coffee. With a chunk of brown home-made bread in one hand and a basin in the other, he sipped and munched. Then he stole to the loft and slept for three hours, awaking very unrefreshed, straw-covered, and full of prickles. A swim in his own dam set him up, so that when he appeared at breakfast, there was no sign of the novel experiences he had been through beyond a pronounced hoarseness, and long periods of abstraction.

"He's been wool-gathering!" said Mrs. Amner.

"I dunno," said Amos. "Saw him fust thing this mornin', and it seemed to me he's been straw-gatherin'."

"Well, I have gathered some straws."

"So?"

"I can see you two want to have a cackle," put in Mr. Amner. "There are some dry mealies to be shelled, and while you shell them in a storeroom, you can get through your talk."

"Right, old baas," put in Amos. And, after breakfast, he hobbled over to the storeroom. He stripped the sheaves from the cobs, while Mark worked the mealie-sheller.

"First thing," said Amos, "did you bring back the stick? No—eh?"

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"No. The stick has been claimed by its owner."

"Who's that?"

"Your uncle."

"Ghoisters! My uncle here!"

"Go on with your work," said Mark; "and keep quiet until you have heard all." He then pieced the incidents together, finishing up with the conversation overnight at the stable.

"My gum!" muttered Amos, staring at Mark. "I can't say that you haven't done well. That's so. Mighty well. Couldn't a' done it better myself."

"Thanks."

"And Robey's comin' down here with his wagon—why for?"

"Well, I did think that you would want to start off and get ahead of your uncle."

"Just pack up and start off away up yonder. Just go crawlin' about over the veld lookin' for nothin'."

"Don't you want to find the diamonds?"

"Didn't I try? and what came of it? Nix. I'd try soon enough, if I knew the way. But where's the use?"

"Suppose you knew the way?"

"S'pose these yer mealies were diamonds."

Mark unbuckled his belt, and, from the money-pocket, produced a little square of paper.

"See that?"

Amos smoothed it out. "Well, what's this foolishness got to do with it?"

"I found that in the knob of the stick, that's all!"

"You found this?" Amos choked off his excitement. He looked at the plan for a long time. "Did *he* know you had found it?"

"I don't think so. There was a hole through the knob to let in the battle-axe. Well, I returned the original drawing to the hole, and sealed the openings up with bees'-wax. For all I know, he may not have found the hiding-place."

"You done well. And Robey's coming—eh?"

"He said he would outspan at Blaauwkrantz to-night."

"Maybe you've asked him if he would be willing to go?"

"He is willing."

"You tole him about the diamonds, in course?"

"I did nothing of the kind."

"Could not you go too, Mark Clinton?"

Mark flushed, for Amos seemed to be a little bit suspicious.

"That rests with you; but if I went, I should, of course, expect a share."

"Could you put any money in?"

"I could raise, perhaps, £50 with what is due from Mr. Amner, and Mr. Goodchild authorized me to draw on him for £50."

"So? I don't want to let him in twice over. If I make anything, he'll get his money back, maybe twice over; but this is my business."

"Then you want to keep it to yourself, I suppose?"

"That's right."

"Very well," said Mark, thoroughly disgusted.

"What I say is this," continued Amos, deftly stripping a cob. "If anything comes of the thing, we'll have six shares. There'll be one share for me, one for you, one for Dave, one for old Baas Amner. That's four. Then there'll be one for expenses, and one left to divide between Goodchild and me. Is that fair?"

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"It's more than fair," said Mark, heartily.

"Well, of course, this is only play-play. It's no good makin' cocksure—see? Now, what do you make of this drawing? It were smart of you to keep it dark all the time."

"I wanted to make sure."

"Now what does that baboon stand for?"

"It means a hill called Baviaan's Kop—a flat-topped hill, you know, beyond the Karroo in the dry country," said Mark, quickly; and he looked with excitement at Amos.

"So?" said Amos. "And my uncle's come out to boss the thing hisself—eh? And he were ready to plank down £500 to Robey—eh?"

"£500 he sprang to."

"Well, you bet he knows where he's goin' to. He's seen this yer sign, and read it easy as winkin'."

"It means Baviaan's Kop, doesn't it?"

"Not by a long chalk."

"What does it mean?"

"You been puttin' that stripped cob through the sheller twice over; that's what."

Mark flung the cob at his companion, who ducked, and the missile caught Mr. Amner in the waistcoat.

"We're just arguing," said Amos, with a solemn face; "and that's one of his points. As you've felt the weight of it, old baas, maybe you'll settle the question."

"Well," said Mr. Amner, with a sly twinkle.

"It's this way. You've maybe yeard of the diamonds?"

"Yes."

"And maybe you've yeard that my uncle's in town,

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name of Van Snaar, and ready to take out Dave Robey and his wagon for a trip, which must be after the diamonds?"

"No; I have not heard that."

"And maybe you yeard that Clinton found an old plan of where the diamonds are in the stick?"

"No," said Mr. Amner, graver.

"Then Clinton will up and tell you."

Mark went through the story again, and gave his reasons for not having told Mr. Amner, namely, because he felt that the secret belonged to Amos first of all.

"I guess there's something in that yarn," said Amos. "My uncle would not trek into the back veld for nix."

"It does seem to take shape," said Mr. Amner.

"Look here, Mr. Amner," said Amos, standing up. "You're a straight man. There's no straighter in this country or out of it. If you had a right, you'd stand to it, and between my uncle and me, with my father in between dead on the veld, the right is with me."

"Your father was a good friend of mine. He had a good name everywhere."

"You would take his word, old baas?"

"I would."

"Then I want you to stand by me. I want you to help us in this fight—not to go with us on the trip, but to fit us out and send us off."

"I should be very glad to do what I could in reason, Amos, but there is no proof. You have nothing to work on."

"There's this," said Amos, handing the plan.

Mr. Amner looked at it gravely, shook his head, and handed it back.

"I can make nothing out of it."

"But I can."

They stood, the three of them, facing each other.

"I can," said Amos; but he did not proceed.

"Well," asked Mr. Amner.

"It tells where the place is where my father found the diamonds."

"Yes."

"If I explain, will you find the wagon and the outfit for the trip, and stand to lose all you spend, or come in with a sixth share and a return of the cost? One big diamond would pay back all, and my father did not bring all away, I know."

"It would cost," said Mr. Amner, thinking, "about £200 down. Your uncle, you say, offered Robey £500? It is a large sum."

"The diamonds are there, old baas."

"It is a risk."

"Ja; a risk for us and for you. You stake your money, we our lives."

The farmer looked at the boy, who was so keen, so cool, and who showed so much restraint.

"All right," he said; "though I am acting foolishly."

"Now I will read you the plan. Clinton thinks this wavy line stands for a hill name of Baviaan's Kop. It means a river—that's what."

"Never knew of a river that ran uphill," muttered Mark, sceptically.

"It's runnin' down a hill, young un. What it means is that the diamonds are beneath the falls of the Orange River."

"By Jove, I never thought of that, and yet the word 'rainbow' was a good pointer."

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"Tain't guesswork with me. The sign just carries out what the old black fellow told me."

"And what does the baboon stand for?" asked Mr. Amner.

"The Baviaan? It just means that the place is fit most for baboons. Come to think of it," he went on quickly, "that must be the place. Diamonds were found on the Vaal, and the Vaal runs into the Orange."

"I hope you will find them," said Mr. Amner. "But you boys must be careful; for I suppose you will be going, Clinton?"

"I should like to have six months' leave."

"I thought so. Well, we must talk over plans, for the sooner you get away the better. Keep your tongues tied, and be very cautious when you go in to town to outfit."

"Guess we'll pack up down here," said Amos. "Dave Robey 'll be along to-morrer, but we'll send his oxen and wagon acrost to his brother's farm."

"Send the wagon away?"

"Well, old baas, I been thinkin'. There's that mule wagon o' yours, that's lighter than Robey's. Well, we'll take that, and use Dave's span."

"You will take my mule wagon?"

"Yes; we'll stiffen her up, and quietly fill her with stores. When she's ready, Dave will fetch his wagon back; we'll span in and trek. If any one wants to know why you're packin' the mule wagon, you can say you're gwine to pay a visit to your son way over on the Banshee."

Mr. Amner smiled, and walked off; and as he disappeared, Si took a long look at the plan.

"It beats me," he muttered.

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"I thought you were so dead sure?"

"I dunno what the blazes that 'bavian's eye' means, and I guess it's the very bull's eye, and all that. Well, we'll get there fust, and find out afterwards."

"Then you don't know?"

"Think it's time you saddled up and rode out to meet Dave—eh? I say," as Mark went off, "give a call to Sixpence that I want him."

Mark paused. Rebellion was in his heart, and mutiny in his eye.

"Call him yourself."

"Eh, Selixpence!" quavered Amos, in imitation of Nosanna's sentimental tones.

Mark laughed, and shouted for the boy, who came up at a run.

"Congela Sixpence," said Amos, carelessly, "I want to make biltong. Go find me news of the buffel. The old baas will let you go—hamba!"

Sixpence danced off, shouting.

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Mark. "You've got cheek, and no mistake. But do you really think you will shoot the buffalo bull?"

"If he's there, of course. Why not?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders and rode off. Either Amos was a rank fraud, or he was the coolest customer he had ever come across. He met Robey down in the Blaauwkrantz Kloof, and on his return saw Sixpence going barefooted up a bush path, with a lean Kaffir dog, who looked half greyhound, half jackal.

The next morning they held an "indaba," and Robey agreed to lend his oxen and his own services for the trip for £50 down and a sixth share. He trekked off to his

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brother's farm on the other side of the Kowie Bush, and returned on horseback the following morning.

"Have you seen him?" was the first question. The whole family came about him anxiously.

"What's up?"

"Amos, of course. He left last night."

Dave looked round slowly, and saw a solitary figure limping up the road with a gun across his shoulder. He jerked his thumb, and then proceeded to off-saddle.

"Where have you been, you bad boy?" asked Mrs. Amner, as they moved out to meet the prodigal.

"Buffel," said Amos, briefly. "Got any coffee?"

"You don't mean to say," shouted Mark, "that you have shot my buffalo?"

"Ja."

"Well, it's a beastly shame."

"Shot him for meat," said Amos. "Nex' time I'll give you first chance. Sixpence is waitin' down by the river, and if you send a Scotch cart, old baas, the carcass can be brought up."

"How did you shoot him, and when? Did he charge?"

"He busted after Sixpence, and while he were stamp-footing about the tree, I jus' crep' up and gave him one behind the ear. That's all. He's tough and mighty thin, but he'll make good biltong."

"Buffel meat," said Dave, quietly, "makes good biltong."

For several days they were all very busy. Miss Amner made jam and limejuice, Mrs. Amner boiled half a dozen plum-puddings, which was the best form her energy could take, as a slice of cold plum-pudding on

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the veld is a joy to man and boy. Nosanna helped Sixpence cut the buffalo meat into strips, which were hung on cross-pieces to be smoked and sun-dried for biltong. The skin of the buffalo was made into rheims by another black fellow. Mr. Amner went into town to buy groceries, and to order some lengths of iron sheeting for some mysterious purpose known only to Amos. Mark was employed as carpenter, Dave Robey as blacksmith, and Amos stood around and talked. He said he was too weak to work, so he kept them amused, while really he "bossed" every one. He directed Mrs. Amner to boil the puddings hard, and he cut out half the jam in favour of dried peaches and "meibos" made from salted apricots. He instructed Mr. Amner to get everything condensed, and, having made everybody nervous by robbing the honey in the hive under Mark's room, he carried out an idea of his own by curing the biltong with honey. It was, however, on the arrival of the sheet-iron, together with zinc sheeting, that he became great.

"What am I going to do with this yer iron? Well, I'll tell you. Ever year of a armoured train? You catch on? This is gwine to be a armoured wagon."

"All de vareld!" exclaimed Dave.

"Yes, boys; that's what. We'll rivet a length above the buck-rail inside the tent, on slots, so 's it will give to the jolts, and another on the other side. Out of the pieces left we'll make shields with a stay at the back."

"Not a bad idea," said Mark. "And the zinc?"

"That's for the water-tanks, 'bout a foot wide and two foot deep, to run each side the wagon inside, with a nozzle that will run outside the tent, and locked taps. We can fill 'em through the nozzles, from outside, and

fill 'em up at the last water-hole before we trek into the dry strip—see?”

“That will make a heavy load?”

“How heavy? Water don't weigh much.”

“Doesn't it? Each tank'll run about 5 feet, and contain about 50 gallons. You would have a weight of about 600 pounds, or 1200 pounds, when they were both filled.”

“You did that figuring smart. 600 pounds each—eh?”

“Two good bales of wool,” said Dave.

“And how much water would that mean for the two?”

“About 960 pints; or say 1920 cupfuls.”

“Think o' that, now. By gum! Here's another. There'll be five of us, with Sixpence and the black leader. How many cups a day will it give them for thirty days?”

“A little over twelve cups a day each.”

“There's the oxen?” said Dave.

“I'm thinking of them. We ought to strike a mud-hole once a week in the dry country, and there'll be enough over then to give the cattle a taste every night.”

“We'll have them tanks made,” said Dave, firmly. “A mouthful a day and a drink once a week will keep 'em going.”

There was the hammering as of a tinker's shop, and the tanks were firmly buckled down to the wagon-bed, one on each side, with an interval of about three feet. Outside the tent, in the front, over the disselboom, was the wagon-box, and this was strongly bound with iron. At the back of that, inside the tent, was a deep tin-lined box, fitted with trays, which held the stores of jam, limejuice, beef-essence, sardines, tinned meat, and medicines. Between that and the tanks was a shallower

box for the coffee, sugar, and meal to be used on the road ; and in between the tanks, in small sacks, levelled down, were the other supplies of meal, mealie meal, coffee, sugar, which were to form the main standby. Above them was placed the "kartel," or bed-bottom, made of rheims stretched on a light, wooden frame, and on this the rugs and karosses were spread, with a couple of waterproof sheets. From the rafters of the tent were suspended bags for brushes, a "housewife," a lantern, a bull's-eye lamp. The armament consisted of three Lee-Metfords, Mark's fowling-piece, and Robey's old Westley Richards, with three Lee-Metford carbines for use in case they had to take refuge under the wagon. The cartridges—except a few left out—were packed in a small tin case, set inside a larger one, with the space filled up with sand. A buck-sail was rolled up and packed away, to be taken out when they stopped for any time ; then, fastened down to the ground on the weather side, it would be stretched over the wagon-top and made fast to poles, furnishing a general room.

"A coat of paint will finish her," said Mr. Amner.

"She's ready," grunted Dave.

"Like a picture," said Amos.

"What she wants," remarked Clinton, "is a set of springs."

They laughed.

"What you want, young'un, is a new headpiece! Who ever yeard of an ox-wagon with springs?"

"Springs will ease the jar on the oxen, and make the travelling more comfortable."

"My ghoisters! Why, there's no springs will stand the weight and the jolts!"

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"None," said Dave.

"Of course not," said Mr. Amner.

Mark said no more. But, in the morning, when he returned with a few more articles from the little railway hut that stood as a station, he produced, one by one, with the help of Sixpence, four rusty-looking objects.

"What you going to do with them?"

"Those are the springs, and if Dave will get the jack to work under the bed of the wagon, we will fit them on the axles—one fore, one aft."

"I believe they're railway springs."

"That is exactly what they are, and they're warranted to stand a heavier strain than they will support when we have them fixed."

"It ain't right!" said Robey. "A bullock-wagon with springs. It's never been done."

"Well, it has to be done now."

And moreover, after a heavy day's work, and much disturbance of the load, the springs were fixed in a workmanlike way, so that the bed of the wagon, instead of coming down on the "long wagon," as the stout beam is called which runs the length of the wagon from one axle to the other, was supported on the springs.

Dave viewed the innovation with suspicion, until Mark struck another idea, which was to lay in a store of oil-cake as fodder for the oxen when crossing the dry belt. Dave had never seen oil-cake before, but when he learnt that oxen were fattened on the food "at home," he took charge of it himself.

"The beauties'll get through," he said, rubbing his hands. "What with a drink of water from the tank and a feed from that stuff, they'll do fine!"

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"Yak! trek fore!" The long whip cracked, and the wagon, white in its new canvas cover, rolled off smoothly on its long journey for the Orange River, some four hundred miles away.

"Take care of yourselves, my boys!" said Mrs. Amner, tearfully; "and mind you boil the water before drinking!"

"Don't follow in the spoor of the other party," said Mr. Amner. "And don't begin a quarrel."

Miss Amner said nothing, but she looked sorrowfully at Si Amos.

"I'll bring you a diamond for your brooch," he said.

"So long as you come back," she began. Then stopped, but he let her hand drop, and moved away.

"She's waving her handkerchief, old chap!" said Mark, as they were going over the ridge that shut out the pleasant homestead.

"I ain't looking," said Si, turning his head nevertheless. "I said to the old baas, I would keep my mouth shut till I came back with the diamonds."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BOER SPY

"That was a good word the old baas spoke, that we should not follow on their spoor," said Amos, a day later, when they had passed through Grahamstown.

"Provided, of course, we knew the road they have taken."

"Ja; I know. They start from Graafrinet."

"How did you find that out?"

"From the paper. There was a sale of stock, and a man named Van Snaar bought up two spans at the top prices."

"Then we won't go through Graafrinet."

"No. I have been thinkin' that we will make the railway at Commadagga, two days' trek, ship the wagon and oxen, and go on by train to De Aar. It will cost us dear, but we will get the start of them on a line that won't cross their track for a long time. What do you think?"

"It will cost money, but it will save time."

"And save the oxen."

"Good! Then let it be so."

They trekked to the little station of Commadagga under the lee of a bare hill, with a litter of rocks and prickly pear and wild tobacco plants all around, and,

after some hours' delay, got their outfit on board a goods train, which set them down on the brown veld about De Aar, after a weary journey. The oxen were too stiff to be inspanned at once, and they were compelled to remain through the night till next morning, when the inevitable *bijwoner* lounged up.

"Who are you, if I may ask?" he drawled in Dutch; "and where do you come from? and where do you go?"

"We are *smousers* (traders)," said Amos; "we come from down there; and we go over-yonder. And will you coffee drink?"

"Ja, *ast bliff*." The Dutchman sat on his hams and sipped. He pointed at the oxen. "From the *zuurvelt* off ne?"

Amos did not deny it.

"And de wa' (wagon), it is ook from Grahamstad, off eh?"

"As you see," said Amos, for there was the maker's name. "Tabak?"

"Ja, *danke*." He took the pouch and filled his pipe, while his smoky eyes travelled over each in turn.

Mark resented the visitor's curiosity, but he saw that Amos and Robey sat and smoked with a look of blank indifference.

"Smousers, eh? The wagon is *tog* small ne."

"Will you brandy drink, *kerel*?"

"*Ast bliff*."

He poured the brandy into his coffee, then rose up to look at the wagon and the railway springs.

"So!" he muttered. "From Grahamstad off, and you go to the *groot rivier*, ne?"

"Ja; the *groot river*, the *Zambesi*."

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“So?” The visitor was not surprised, neither did he smile. He sat a few minutes in silence, then stretched himself and lounged away to the station.

Robey lifted his ten fingers; but Amos shook his head.

“What do you mean?” asked Mark.

“Two upon ten,” said Dave.

“Two upon ten?”

“Ja; two eyes on ten fingers. I put him down as a thief; but Amos says ‘No.’”

“I don’t like him,” said Amos.

“But Dutchmen ask many questions.”

“Ja; but when a chap arsts about me, I want to know about him. I’m just going to the station to arst when the next train from nowhere comes in.”

He strolled over and knocked at the ticket-window without noticing the Dutchman, who was leaning against the door-post.

“There’s no one,” said the Dutchman; “they sleep yet. It is altogether bad.”

“Ja, oom; it is bad. I want to send a briefje by the telegraaf, and now I must wait.”

“I also; it is sleg (bad).”

“And there is no paper—no pencil even.”

“Ja, neef; dar is telegraaf papier behind there.”

“Danke, oom; so there is.” Amos went to a little partition and sprawled over a telegraph form, while the Dutchman looked over his shoulder.

“It is funny, oom; but where do I write the address?”

“There,” said the Dutchman, placing a dirty finger in the corner; “and one word in each little box,—see?”

“It is a wonder-like thing, the telegraaf oom. Men tell me it can speak in Dutch also.”

"That is true neef. I have one in Dutch written. But you do not write."

"Ne, oom. It will cost money. We will spend the money in the canteen," and Amos tore off the sheet and rolled it up. "Come!"

"Ast bliff."

Amos spent his shilling, and went back to the wagon, where he smoothed out the telegraph form.

"What have you got there?"

"I dunno; but that beggar is sendin' off a telegram; and I want to know why, and all that. He wrote with a stumpy pencil, but"—after frowning over the form—"I can make nix of it."

Mark went into the wagon and returned with a magnifying-glass and a pen. Holding the glass in position, he traced the faint impressions lightly in ink.

"Now let us see. There is a V, then another big letter, then another V and two dots, then a capital W and a stroke."

"Write it out," said Amos.

Mark wrote out V— — V. — . W— then in the body of the message the two words "wa," and "G—stad."

"What do you make of that, Amos?"

"Wa' is 'wagon;' but for the rest, well, I am lost."

"What do you say to this?" said Mark. "'Van Snaar, V— W—, wagon has arrived from Grahamstown.' Is there a place beginning with V. W.?"

"Victoria West," said Robey. "Somewhere in the Karroo, I think."

Mark produced from the wagon a pocket-map, and Victoria West was located off the main line about a

hundred miles from Graafrinet. They looked at each other. Then they studied the blank form with the disconnected tracing, and then pored over the map.

"So," said Amos, "the old jackal is slim! He is watching all the paths. But see here, this telegraph, if it is as we think, will not be enough. He will want to year more, and maybe the Dutchman will go south by the nex' train."

"Well."

"Let him. He will be perhaps a day in the train, and another day to Victoria West. That will give us two days' start, anyway."

"Yes, but you may depend that if he has really taken the trouble to watch us, he will send mounted men ahead of his wagon to cut us off."

"Ja. True, and that means that we must keep a good watch—eh?"

"Can't we go another way? Why not go across there to the Orange River, and then trek down its banks?"

"It mustn't be. That would put ten days to our time, and in ten days—— Well, you see for yourself. We must trek north-west—see? to Bushman's Land, and keep in front. Dave, at the next outspan you must paint out that 'Grahamstown' and we'll give the tent a coat of red clay. It's too darned white. Clap up the oxen."

They inspanned and trekked. The Dutchman watched them off.

"Do you want a ride, oom?"

"Ne neef, not now, not just now, but later, ja."

"You measly spy!" muttered Amos.

They were on the level plain now that stretched away for ten miles or more to a ridge of low kopjes. When in

three hours they passed the kopjes there was another hour-stretch to a second ridge, without so much as a tree or a shrub to break the level. Their journey had begun, and they held their way like a ship at sea, moving in a perpetual circle, the horizon receding as they advanced, with a mirage holding out promise of calm lakes and magnificent trees that never appeared. There were white patches where flocks of angora goats grazed, and dirty-white patches where flocks of merino sheep spread out, for they were passing through a good stock-raising country; but the aspect was dreary, and the man who can live on these wide sweeps of sun-burnt veld without longing for the sight of trees and green fields, must be born and reared on them.

"Say, Clinton, see them little white specks over yonder. They're springbok."

"Ja," said Dave. "One trek I made to the Diamon' Fields I seen ten thousand bok in one herd."

"I seen mor'n that," said Si.

"So?"

"Ja. I seen maybe fifty thousand, and I don't wanter see so many agin. It were when I were a kid, trekking with my father."

"Go ahead, Si."

"It were dry an' hot. I got sores on the back o' my hands, my eyes were sore, and my lips were cracked. You know the way the oxen moan when they're thirsty, Dave?"

"I know too well."

"They stood with their heads low to the ground an' moaned, and away off there shone out one of those sky-pictures."

"Mirage," said Mark.

"That's it, like we seen just now. My father had told me there was nix behind it, but it looked so true that by'mby I crep' down into a sluit till I were out of sight of the camp, and set off barefooted to find that stretch of clear water, an' sit under one of them big trees. I kep' on an kep' on over the burnt veld, the tufts of grass goin' into tinder as I kicked against them, an' the sun comin' down hot and hotter on my head. Now and agin a puff of wind would come dodging along, kickin' up a dust here, twisting into a brown column over there, and then dying away, and all of a sudden the sky-picture melted away, and where it had been was a low ridge of black rocks steaming under the sun. I jess lay down by a ant-hill with a hole in it where the aarde-valk had scraped away the wall. I jess lay there with my head in the hole for the shade, until I yeard a queer noise, that were not a noise, but a sort of shadow of a noise. It might er been a wagon trekking far away, or better still the sound of a thunderstorm working up. I sat up, and see some jackals running with their tongues out for the ridge. And I yeard the noise plain. It were like the sound of hail on the ground, or the noise of the sea a long way off, but the sky was like a blue china plate with a yellow rim. I stared around and seen a cloud of dust creeping up into the sky over the ridge. I got skeered, I dunno why, and went off for the rocks, and then I seed the veld were alive. One of those black snakes came outer a heap o' dust and slithered into the hole I had left, and all about little things were on the hurry-skurry. Out from under the stones there came scorpions and centipedes, which ran this way and that till they found a hole. First

I walked, then I ran, and the sand-cloud grew nigher and blacker, while the noise grew deeper like the sound of storm-waves. Behind and above all was still and hot, but beyond the ridge there was something which was mighty queer. Other things ran for the rocks, and I ran, coming into a sluit where a she-jackal was whining to her cubs. I gave way to her, crouching agin the wall. And up the dry sluit came a yellow-and-black veld slang, big round as my body almost. He held his head up and went by them cubs 'thout so much as a flicker o' his tongue, though he hissed in my face. I yelled out, but he took no more notice, and by'mby I let out again. When I climbed out of the sluit I saw a wave break over the ridge."

"What did you see?"

"I seen the foam tossed over the ridge. That's what it looked like—bits o' white flying into the air all along, and over them the black cloud of dust. Then I seen they were springbok; and in about two shakes there was a flood pouring down the ridge—a real flood, shooting out spray as the boks jumped outer the press, giving out a noise like I never year'd. Right and left, far as I could see, the veld was alive, and it seemed to me 's if they were there to run me down. I ran on, and steered to the shelter of a big rock, pressing up against it, and a bok took the rock in his stride, coming down with a clatter of his hoofs, and after him another and another, till the air was warm and strong with the smell of the springbok. I covered my face for a time, but, finding I were not tramped, I looked out. The air were thick with dust, and every second a white belly floated over; but I could see the ground moving, and it made

me feel sick. Ghoisters! such a many live things I never seen. They ran quiet with their mouths shut, and a wild look in the eyes; but now and again a sharp cry would spring out of the roar and thunder. And by'mby I see why. A bok sprang high into the air, maybe ten feet, and he came down with his feet bunched on another. They both fell, cried out, and never got up. That were going on all around—a slip, a cry, and then the life beaten outer them. Where the sluit was there was a wave, where they leapt high to clear it; and outer the sluit I see something stand up, like a branch, stand up and fall, and stand up and go down again. By'mby they were not so thick, and one o' the boks turned his head and looked at me. Yet he wern't a bok. He made as if he would come to the rock, but a bok lit on his back, and he sprang forward with his legs out, and his mouth open. I could see the crook of his claws and the gleam of his teeth. He were a lion, that's what, caught in the press, and forced to keep on. And they went by and went by, and among 'em a wildebeeste, and a horse covered with foam; and away over the veld there went the black cloud of dust, with the moving things beneath, and the sound died away. Then a jackal howled, and from all parts there came aasvogels and ringed crows, and I stirred. I seen then that I were not alone. There were a muishond shivering between my legs, and a puff-adder with his broad head under one of my naked feet. I crep' away down to the sluit, to see what that tall thing were, and I seen the veld slang writhing and coiling about, with his skin cut to pieces. I dunno what happened after, but I were at the wagon when I woke up. My father found me wandering on the veld, anyhow."

"So?" said Dave.

"Where were the springbok going?"

"To find water; that's what."

"Ja," said Dave. "They travel so when the land is dry. One time they came into a Karroo town, and ate up the garden things. But they are now daarom scarce."

CHAPTER XV

MARK MAKES A CAPTURE

However, they had venison steaks for supper, and made two good treks in the night—one before midnight, the other in the small hours, when they “tied up,” and finished the buck. The next day they fell in with a party of police, who were travelling with a wagon for Prieska, and kept company with them for two days, parting roads at a vlei.

“Why not come with me?” said the police-sergeant.

“We told you,” said Amos, “we’re going prospecting and trading.”

“Look out that Rooi Stoffel does not run across you; that’s all.”

“All right. What’s that high land over yonder on the left?”

“That’s Jagtpan Rand.”

“Is there water there?”

“There are two or three vleis among the hills, and on the other side.”

“The road to Bushman’s Land passes where?”

“At the near end of the rand; but take my word, don’t go that way.”

“Well, so long, sergeant!”

Mark makes a Capture 235

"So long! I say it's a pity to waste those oxen. Swaap them for my span!"

"Not trading," said Dave.

"Stoffel is bound to have your turn-out. Won't deal—eh? Well, so long! and don't say I didn't warn you."

The police turned north, and the diamond-hunters steered north-west, till they came to a patch of mimosa thorns, where they outspanned. To them presently came a mounted Boer with a shaggy beard, who had the outward appearance of a tramp, and the manners of a police-court magistrate. He sat on his worn saddle, held together by string, and favoured them with a hard stare through deep-set fierce eyes tinged with red.

"Who are you?"

"Prospectors, oom."

"You were travelling with the police?"

"Ja, oom."

"Where do you go?"

"Over yonder, by Jagtpan Rand, into Bushman's Land."

"Do you know the path?"

"Ja; the police told us."

"The police told you?"

"Ja; they tried to frighten us by tales of Rooi Stoffel; but we were told he is not there."

"Ja; he is not there. You can go quietly, without fear; but now I want outspan money—one dollar."

"The price is eighteenpence, oom."

"A dollar is my price, and a kombers (blanket) for my vrouw."

"We are poor people, oom."

"Poor people travel not with such oxen, see you. Put in the kombers, ook a bottle brandy."

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"If I don't pay you now," muttered Amos, with a grimace, "you will be wanting the wagon;" and he got out a gaudy red blanket, together with a bottle of "Cape smoke."

The Boer took the parcel, and dropped the money into his tobacco-pouch.

"There is good grass and water at the end of the berg, within two treks," he said, pointing with his whip ahead.

"Danke, oom; but we travel only by day, and tie up at night. It will take us, perhaps, three days going slow, and you say Rooi Stoffel is away?"

"Ja, he is far. 'Dag!" He nodded his head, and rode off.

Amos kicked off his boots, and rolled up his trousers. "Dave," he said, "bring the oxen close in. Sixpence, spoor!"

A moment later the two were going barefooted on the track of the horseman.

"Where do we come in?" asked Mark, turning to Dave, who stood staring in the direction taken by Amos. "It's disgusting being ordered about by a boy. Why don't you kick?"

"Do you know who that man was? why he came? what he wants? and where he has gone?"

"No; and I don't want to know."

"Nor me; but Amos does—see? Can you follow his spoor? No, nor me. Well, Amos can. So I do what he says."

An hour later Amos returned from the side opposite to that he had taken on leaving.

"Inspan!" he cried.

"What have you seen?" asked Mark.

"First inspan."

And Mark swallowed down his impatience. His part of the inspanning was to hold the rheims first as the oxen lined up, and then to lift the heavy yokes.

"Are the axles well greased, Dave?"

"Ja."

"Dave, you see the end of the berg there, maybe thirty miles off. We must be there at sun op."

Dave took a long look at Amos. "And the road? It will be soon dark, and the track is very small to follow."

"You have travelled by the stars before, Dave. Sixpence will go on with me, and when the road is bad one of us will come back to you. Don't use your whip. As soon as it is dark, trek. Clinton, you will follow the wagon after it has gone five minutes, and keep your ears open."

"But——" began Mark.

Amos had gone, taking his rifle, and Robey stood lighting his pipe with his eyes on the distant hill, now gleaming like copper under the rays of the setting sun. The oxen stood with heads out, chewing the cud, and the little black "leader" stood at their head with the "trek-touw" in his hand, biting at a meaty bone. The distant hill turned from copper to purple, then stood out clear-cut like a silhouette against the sky, and was swallowed up in the night. Dave looked up at the sky till the stars flashed out, and he found his pointers.

"Trek!" The oxen sighed, then they heaved, and went off with clicking hoofs. The wagon, fresh greased, ran smoothly, and the stout railway springs played a part that was not anticipated in lessening the loud creaking noise made by the friction between the bed of the wagon and

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the axles. As Mark stood by the dying embers of the camp fire with a sense of loneliness that comes with the night on the veld, a feeling of unreality that had been with him so long left him. All along he had had a sort of secret understanding with himself that this diamond-hunt was only an excuse for a huge picnic, and that the idea of a grim conspiracy on the part of Uncle Futter, *alias* Van Snaar, was merely a melodramatic touch put in to "make believe." Now he felt in his bones that danger was all round him. With that feeling went his resentment towards Amos, for he knew that, when it came to bushcraft, he was a child compared with the Colonial boy, whose early training had developed his natural faculties. Although he could still hear the noise of the wagon, he already felt lost, and when he started off it was with difficulty that he picked up the trail. When, however, he was clear of the low thorn trees with their flat tops, he found the going easier; for it was possible to make out the bulk of the wagon. The oxen were travelling fast, and to keep his place he stepped out at a pace which he reckoned to be about three and a half miles an hour. At regular intervals there came the cry of the leader, warning the driver of a hole, or an obstacle on the right or left.

"Aar achter jou!" (look out on your right!) "Or achter jou!" (look out on the left!)

They had travelled about two hours when Mark's ear caught a faint noise behind. He stopped to listen, and heard more clearly—a soft, regular sound, that might be made by a dog running. He went on a little, then stopped again, and for half an hour the sound grew upon him without his being able clearly to satisfy himself

Mark makes a Capture 239

whether it came from behind or from the side, or whether it were simply an echo from the wagon. Then he knew what it was. About a quarter of a mile back he had crossed a strip of hard ground, and now he heard on this the unmistakable ring of hoofs. He pushed on to warn Dave; then altered his mind, and stood again. The horseman was not coming on evidently at a steady canter, but in little runs and walks, and Mark felt a growing desire to have the rider under view. He ran on till he was almost up to the wagon, then took cover behind a stunted tree, and waited. In a few minutes he made out the shadowy form of a horse and its rider, and he was glad he had stopped, for he could see the horseman pull up, then come on and pull up again, unmistakably showing that he was using the utmost caution. Opposite the tree he walked again, and to Mark's excitement dismounted. He stood a moment, listening, hitched the reins to the tree, then stepped on silently on foot. This was more than Mark had bargained for. His idea had been to hail the man, and demand an explanation; but the other's movements had taken him by surprise. While he was wondering what to do, he saw the horse, which had kept its ears pricked towards him, suddenly turn its head. A moment later Mark heard the man's footsteps, and a plan shaped itself in his brain. He slipped round the tree, and as the man came up he sprang out, bore him to the ground face downwards, and pinned his elbows behind.

"Be still!"

"Verdom!" spluttered the man. "What the duivel!"

Mark put a knee into the small of the man's back, then, unbuckling his belt, bound his elbows together. From

the horse's neck he unwound a rheim, and made one end fast to the belt; then he picked up a rifle the man had dropped, and mounted.

"Go on!" he said.

The man said something in Dutch.

"Go on!" and the man, growling in his throat, stepped out. "Quicker!" said Mark. "And if you shout, ek will skit."

Mark smiled several times. The thing had been done neatly, and he thought of the sensation he would make when he reached the wagon. The fellow was evidently a spy, and the capture would prove very fortunate. So he persuaded himself, as he sat like a gentleman in the saddle, while every one else had to walk.

"Step out," he ordered.

"Ja, neef; ja, mynheer," answered the man, humbly.

"We won't do you any harm?"

"Danke, neef."

"Though we may keep you a day, you see, unless you can give us a good explanation."

"Ja, neef. Ek is en arme Boer."

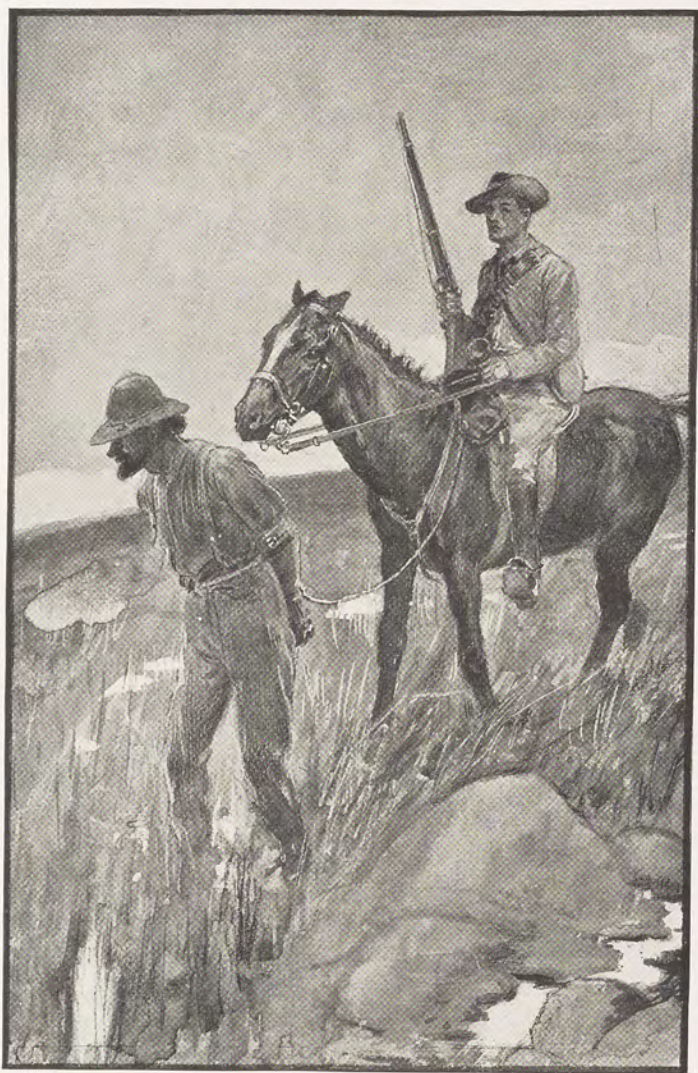
"Well, 'arme Boers' should not follow people at night."

"Ek es bang, neef. There are bad volk about."

"So I see. The wagon seems to have gone a good way."

"Ja, neef. De wa' is not far."

"I can't hear it anyhow," muttered Mark, and he rode on in silence, anxiously peering into the dark. "It's very funny, but we don't appear to be going right. Just now there was a light on my right—the police camp, I thought; and I can see a light only on the left."



M 964

MARK BRINGS IN A CAPTIVE



Mark makes a Capture 241

"Is that a fire fore?"

"So there is."

"It is your wa' certain."

"By Jove!" muttered Mark; "I must have fallen a long way behind" (aloud). "That light is still."

"I think so too, neef. They have outspanned—your friends."

Mark said nothing, but he was very uneasy in his mind. Some faculty or instinct was making a strenuous effort to telegraph a warning to his brain. He peered about him like one who looks for a familiar landmark, and then he stopped, with a queer feeling up and down his backbone. He had got hold of the explanation. When he was walking he remembered that the wind was blowing from his left. Now it was on his right. Instead of following the wagon, he was going away from it, and that fire ahead was probably the camp fire of strangers—perhaps enemies.

"What is it, neef?" asked the Boer.

Mark stared at the man. He had heard of Boer slimness, and here he was the victim of it at his first experience.

"It grows cold, neef; and there is coffee at the fire, and cooked meat—eh?"

"Ja," said Mark. "And you are not afraid to go to the camp? You have a good excuse for the people there—eh?"

The man laughed. "Maybe, neef, you would explain how it is that you made a Boer walk, and tied his arms."

"I hope I have not braced you up too tight," said Mark, alighting. "Let me see. So." He tightened the buckle, and then he bound his handkerchief round the

man's mouth. "Turn round. That's it; and don't attempt to trick me again."

Once more they set out, but this time the Dutchman, instead of walking briskly, held back, and finally sat down.

Mark was in despair. He judged he had travelled back about six miles, and that the wagon would be some twelve miles ahead. He threatened his prisoner, coaxed him, bullied him; but the man would not budge. He tried to lift him to the saddle, but the Boer made no effort, and the dead weight was too much for his strength. What on earth was he to do with the beggar? Tow him along the road? No. Then what? Tie him to a tree? That occurred to him several times, but the treatment seemed too severe. Finally he bound the man's legs in such a way that he could move a few inches at a time, and then he turned and cantered towards the fire to find out, if he could, who the men were. He rode up to within half a mile at a canter, then went on at a walk, until he could see a few figures about the fire. Then he fastened the horse to a tree, and crept nearer still, till he could see distinctly. As he thought, they were not his friends. There appeared to be at least half a dozen men, and very soon he recognized two faces in the reflection of the fire—the hairy face of Bill Brent, and the face of the Dutchman who had demanded outspan money that afternoon.

Stealing back to his horse, he walked it some distance, then cantered off, and never stopped to look for the "arme Boer" he had left trussed up. He himself could not see the track, but the horse could, and, allowing it a free head, it carried him at a swinging canter over the long flats to the rising ground, where he slowed down to

Mark makes a Capture 243

a walk. He dismounted, struck a match to satisfy himself that he was on the wagon spoor, led the horse over the ridge, and pressed on again, riding a little too loose, for a sudden swerve and violent plunge unseated him.

"Wie bin jij?" he heard the fatal words as he sat up with a ringing in his head.

"Hang it!" he growled.

"My ghoisters! it's you! Where in thunder did you pick up that horse?"

"Amos! Thank goodness! By Jove! you gave me a 'skreik.'"

"What does this mean, young Clinton? 'Skreik,' my footie! I nearly went daft when I found you were not keeping your place."

"Where's the wagon, Si?"

"Never mind the wagon. Whose horse is that?"

"I say, your uncle is on our track. I crept up to their wagon, and saw Brent and that fellow who visited us this afternoon."

"But the horse, man?"

"The horse! Look here, a chap was following the wagon. I caught him, tied his hands, and made him walk while I rode. Well, what do you think happened?"

"Was he a Dutchman?"

"Yes."

"I guess he turned you round and went back to his camp."

"How do you know? Well, he did; but luckily I found out in time; and here I am."

"And I s'pose the chap has given the news, and those skepsels will be after us?"

"I bet he will not reach the camp till the morning. I trussed him up."

"You did—eh? Well, that was good—splendid. Dave's getting a good three and a half miles out of that mooi span. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fit as a fiddle. It was awfully good of you to come back. It's no use looking for the horse, I suppose?"

"Better let him run. He ain't yours, you know; and people are down on horse-thieves."

"By Jove!" said Mark. "I never thought I was going off on another fellow's horse."

"Oh, it don't matter. We're in for it, in any case; but it's just as well they won't find the horse with us when they do come."

"And I took the fellow's gun, too. No, I didn't; it is strapped to the saddle. I say, Amos, what made you go in for this long trek?"

"Well, I guessed that Dutchman who came for the outspan money were playing some game, and I spooed him. He rode hard back to a wagon; and, anyway, it was the safest thing to get a long start."

"Well, we are in for it."

"Up to a axle-tree, right up. I guess we'll know what's what this time to-morrer."

They walked on in silence for some time, turning over the situation in their minds.

"Ever been under fire, Amos?"

"Onct."

"How did you feel?"

"Frightened right through. It's funny how a chap will take no end of trouble to put hisself in a place which

Mark makes a Capture 245

he don't like when he gets there. We'd 'a been a darn sight better off way down at Burnt Kraal, 'mong the bananas, than up in this blistered country, with bullets flying around."

"Well, we are here."

"There's no getting away from that. We'll just have to get along somehow."

"What do you think they will do?"

"Get mad and bust themselves up trying to catch us. Year that jackal calling? That's Sixpence, and you can tell he's got the shivers from the way he howls;" and with a hand to his mouth, Amos gave the mournful cry of the little hunter. In a few minutes they were up with the wagon.

"Is that him?" asked Dave, anxiously.

"All alive and kicking! What yer think, Dave? He's been horse-jumping."

"Ghoisters!"

"Ja; and he rode back past our last fire, to where Van Snaar is outspanned; but they did not see him, and they won't know till the morning, for he tied up the man who rode the horse."

"Then the fat is in the fire—eh?"

"How far have you travelled, Dave?"

"No oxen ever covered such ground, Amos. They have been in the yoke nine hours. Of that I have pulled up to blow them, maybe two hours. They have travelled twenty-five miles, Amos. Is it good?"

"It is wonder-like, Dave. See yon? It will be sun-up in an hour. Tie them up till it is lighter, then we will trek a mile or half-mile to a good outspan."

"And toe!"

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"We will turn them loose for the day, and trek again in the night."

"But if the people come after?"

"Can any other span cover the ground in a day?"

"They will follow on horseback."

"Did you see any horses at the wagon, Clinton?"

"I believe there were a couple of saddles by the fire; but there may have been more."

The oxen were tied up, and Amos crawled into the wagon; but Dave sat on the wagon-box, smiling. Mark was too excited to think of sleep. Instead, he watched the breaking of the morning with thoughts of the far Homeland. As the sunlight streamed over the veld, the weary oxen were called on for another effort, and hauled the wagon to the far side of a small kopje, with a vlei of yellow water in a little hollow. When the dew was off the grass they were turned out, and they grazed slowly towards the vlei, where they drank, standing belly-deep. Then they splashed out, grazed briskly for an hour or so, and, one by one, knelt down and rolled heavily over with contented sighs, their heads turned all one way. By the wagon a fire of dry sticks was made, the kettle boiled, the coffee made and drunk. Amos took a blanket to the top of the kopje, and, after a long look round, went off to sleep. Dave Robey slept on the ground, with his hat over his face. Sixpence went to sleep face down. The little black leader curled up under the wagon; and Mark, sitting against a rock with a field-glass glued to his eyes, soon dropped off.

When he awoke the sun had travelled halfway through the heavens, and was blazing down with fierce strength. He crawled off to a breadth of shade, his eyelids weighing

Mark makes a Capture 247

like lead, and with a very strong feeling of discomfort from sleeping in his clothes. Some one caught him by the ankle and pulled him out.

"Wake up! Here they come!"

"Eh?" grunted Mark, blinking at Amos, and breaking out into a yawn which was strangled in its birth as he realized who "they" were.

The shock woke him as thoroughly as if he had been doused with water, and his gaze went straight to a little cloud of dust about a mile away. He fixed his glasses.

"Three men on horseback," he said, looking at Amos.

"That is all," said Amos.

He sat with his hands hanging slackly over his knees, and a pipe with the bowl down in his mouth.

Mark looked about him. The oxen were on their feed, and grazing towards the wagon, the "leader" at their heels, and Sixpence behind with his blanket around him.

"Where is Dave?"

"Over yonder on that little kop. Here is your gun and mine behind this rock. Get behind it and wait?"

"You think they will shoot?"

"No; I think they will try to bluff—see? but if they mean mischief, they will send a man round to where Dave is hiding. Then you must cover the man who talks to me with your gun. Just watch him all the time, and call out, so that they will know you are ready to shoot."

"What do you mean to do, Si?"

"I will meet them out there before they come to the wagon—see?"

"Without arms?"

"Ja."

"That is all rot."

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"No; it is right. When they see you are ready they will be careful, and if one of them rides west I will jump for cover. But I think they will try to play a game. They will make a plan to keep us here till their wagon comes up. I think so."

Amos sat staring at the little band of horsemen, and Mark wondered at his limp and nerveless attitude. He himself was quivering with excitement, with his brain on fire, and his body possessed by a demon of restlessness.

As they came nearer, the horsemen pulled up, but seeing Amos walk down from the little hill, they advanced. The man who had claimed outspan money was among them.

"Daag, oom!"

"Daag!"

And the three looked silently at Amos, and then at the wagon and the oxen.

"Where are the others?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I want one of them—the rooinek. Bring him out."

"Soetjes, oom, soetjes. He is not your servant."

"He is a thief."

"I hear."

"He stole a saddled horse."

"See for yourself. Is there a horse about?"

"Be careful, boy. We have come to take that horse-thief back to the man he robbed, so that the justice of the veld can be done him."

"What justice is that, oom?"

"Sjambok justice—see you? The man he robbed and injured will treat the rooinek as he was treated."

"Was he a Boer, this man?"

Mark makes a Capture 249

"Ja; and we will teach the rooinek a lesson."

"A Boer," said Amos, slowly. "And you tell me that a rooinek who is young to the veld got the better of a grown Boer and took his horse? You are playing, oom."

The Dutchman, with a sinister look, shifted his rifle.

"Take care," said Amos, sharply. "If you move your gun, my friend on the kop there may shoot."

The three men looked at the top of the hill, and saw the two rifles pointed towards them.

"What means that?"

"Nix, oom. Except that you are not going to carry this thing off as you thought. Now, listen. The man who lost his horse came like a jackal after our wagon, playing the spy, and he was treated as a spy. Maybe he did not tell you that."

"Is that so?" said the Dutchman, in surprise.

"Ja, oom, it is so."

The Dutchman stroked his beard and looked steadily at Amos.

"Well, that is your word. Maybe you are right, but that cannot be settled till the two are brought face to face. Your man will not be afraid to face our man?"

"Not at all, oom."

"That is good," said the Dutchman, heartily. "By the morning our friend will be here, and we can then settle the matter together."

"Ja."

"We will ast bliff, neef, sit by your fire; for we have ridden far."

"I am sorry," said Amos.

"Eh?"

"You come from Van Snaar—eh? I know it. Well,

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Van Snaar means us no good, and we would like to know from him first if he is ready to be friends."

"This is new, neef. Van Snaar is nothing to us. Come, there is a man with you who knows the law of the road. He will tell you, since you don't know, that the best seat at the fire is, by right, the stranger's. It is a dog's word you give us, young man."

"I know; but you are from Van Snaar, and Van Snaar would not eat our salt—see? neither would we eat his. You can have coffee and food where you sit; but you will go back to Van Snaar with our message."

"Mij Gott!" burst out one of the three, angrily.

"Hold still, Pete!" said the leader. "We will take your coffee, neef; but you do wrong."

Amos called to the "leader," "Bring coffee and meat."

The horsemen waited stolidly till the kettle was brought, with food, and they drank and ate, sitting in the saddle.

"And you ask us to go back?" said the spokesman, wiping his mouth, and tossing the "beaker" to the ground.

"I am sorry," said Amos; "but you see, there is nothing else. If Van Snaar comes, and would do us harm, what chance would we have with you in our camp? You must forgive us; but we are afraid."

"You mistake, neef. Our business is not for Van Snaar, but for our friend."

"But you come from Van Snaar?"

"You are slim, neef. You want us to ride back, so that you can inspan and trek."

Amos laughed. "The veld is wide, and you are on horseback. In one hour you could ride round and head us off. No, oom; what I want is that you and Van

Mark makes a Capture 251

Snaar come together as friends. Then we can settle with him and with you about your friend who says he lost his horse. We must be careful, because we are weak and afraid—see?”

“Why did you trek last night?”

“We ran away, oom, because we were afraid of Rooi Stoffel, and then we found that Van Snaar was after us.”

“But I told you Stoffel was not here.”

“Ja; but after a time we grew frightened. We wanted to get clear of Jagtpan Rand. When we saw you we thought you were Stoffel’s men. A man on horseback gives us the skreiks! That is so, oom.”

“Well, I tell you, you are making things hard for you. You can trek, if you like; but you can’t escape, if any one cares to follow.”

“I know too well.”

“And you do bad to make enemies of us.”

Amos groaned. “Listen,” he said in a whisper. “If you moved a step forward, that man up there would shoot, and he shoots dead straight. He would shoot you first, and me after, if I spoke. I am more bang for him than for Van Snaar. Now you know.”

The three men glanced uneasily up at the rocks, and gathered up their reins.

“He caught the sun in his head—see!” muttered Amos, with a shiver. “He is dwaas (mad), and he made me come down here without so much as a pistol!”

“All de wareld!”

“Ja; and, like a man mad, he is slim. He has put Robey over on the rand yonder, to stop you in case you tried to get round. It would be better if you went back. He will grow angry if we talk much.”

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“Another word, neef. What will you and Robey do if he is mad?”

Amos looked very sly. “Maybe he will sleep soon, see; and then—— You verstan?”

The Dutchman looked slowly at Amos. “Perhaps you lie, neef?”

“See for yourself! Would I have come to meet you unarmed?”

“Well, we shall see. When he sleeps, you bind him fast, and give him over to us when we come with the wagon.”

“That seems good, oom. Now ride.”

The Dutchman turned and rode back at a gallop, and Amos whistled to Sixpence to drive in the oxen.

“How did you manage to get rid of them?” asked Mark, anxiously.

“I let out that you were crazy, and mighty ready to shoot. So they ’lowed it would be safer for me an’ Dave to tie you up when you were asleep!”

“Thank you for nothing!”

“Oh, it don’t matter. I guess we’re all pretty well crazy together. Inspan, Dave! Sixpence, go on along the path and keep watch!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRST ATTACK

They trekked about three miles; and Robey selected the outspan place with an eye to the safety of his oxen. Several hundred yards from the wagon-path there stood a nest of three kopjes close together, enclosing, perhaps, half an acre of ground, where "his beauties" would have a chance of protection. The wagon was drawn broadside up between two of the kopjes facing the road, and a few thorn bushes with loose stones barred the other openings. There being yet a couple of hours before dusk, the oxen were turned out to graze, while Robey cut bushes for the fence, and the others carried water to fill one of the tanks for the first time. It was a weary job, for the vlei they drew the water from was a good distance, and the intake of the tank was rather too small. One of them had to stand on the buck-rail to receive and empty the buckets. Of course Amos selected that job, but when Clinton had made five journeys to the vlei and back he took the law into his own hands, pulled Amos off the buck-rail, and climbed up himself. Amos went down to the vlei with the empty bucket, but it was Sixpence who returned with the full bucket together with his own.

"Where is Baas Amos?"

"He fills the buckets, baas, once, and then he look at the spoor."

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“What spoor?”

“Wa’ spoor.”

“Wagon spoor over there on the veld? What does it mean?”

“Aandias, baas;” and Sixpence went off, swinging the buckets.

Amos soon came back, and stood leaning against the wagon, whistling softly, and staring at his boots. Presently he looked up.

“You chaps seem to be making ready for a long stay—eh?”

“What’s the matter now?” asked Mark, sharply.

“I dunno; but I specks somethin’s happened. That wagon that’s comin’ on ain’t the right wagon. The right wagon’s on in front.”

“How do you know?”

“I dunno. Dave, you go and look at the wagon-tracks down by the vlei.”

Dave went off, looked at the wheel-marks, and returned.

“It is a light wagon that. It passed this morning, going fast.”

“It may be a strange wagon,” said Mark.

“True,” said Robey.

“You say so? Well, it is Van Snaar’s wagon. Why? Because there is also horse spoor there—and it is spoor of one of the three horses that we saw this morning. The wagon travels fast and light. Why? ’Cos they want to reach some place first, and that place is the last water-hole before the dry country—see? There he will wait till his other wagon comes up.”

“And toe?”

"Where would we be, with one wagon in front heading us off from the water, and another behind to catch us when they like?"

"This is all guess-work, after all," put in Mark.

"It seems to me right," said Robey. "Those three Boers, they would not have gone so easily if they were not sure."

"That is the better for us—that they are so sure."

"How so, Amos?"

"Well, they won't hurry to finish us off—see? They will wait till it suits them; and in between we can make a plan. The wagon that follows with all their goods is still far behind, so that the people won't trouble us. Ghoisters!"

Dave had picked up his rifle and ran towards his oxen at a speed that his slow movements never gave promise of. From beyond the vlei a horseman was galloping to intercept the cattle.

"Clinton, take the outer kopje. Sixpence, get under the wagon," and Amos raced up the largest kopje, while Mark ran round to the one on the far side.

Far off to the left there was a faint wisp of smoke, but as Mark fingered his rifle there was a crack down below, and he saw the horseman flying through the air, to come to the ground with a thud. He stared at the fellow, and then shifted his gaze to Robey, who was lying flat on his stomach; then a report from behind made him start round in time to see Amos duck his head. A bullet touched a rock, and went off with a queer complaining noise. His eyes swept the veld all round. He could see nothing, but as he lifted his head higher he thought there was a movement where he had before seen a trace of smoke, and

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as he stared, fuming, a bullet whipped overhead, and he fired. There was a shrill whistle, and he saw some one run. It was the little black leader making for the kopjes, and behind him ran the oxen.

They came up close on the heels of the little fellow, surged in through the narrow entrance, snorted and poked at each other, then gained the shelter, and turned round, with wild eyes and dripping muzzles, their heads held up. A trickle of blood ran down the yellow hide of one, and an ox, smelling the taint of blood, bellowed furiously. Then Robey raced in, not going straight, but twisting; and about his feet, as he danced, little puffs of dust started up. He darted in, and began piling up the thorn-bushes, while all the time he whistled to his oxen. Then he ran up among the rocks, and had fired three times in rapid succession before Mark had pulled trigger again. The firing ceased.

"There they go!" cried Amos. "Four horses and five men. You didn't hit that chap, Dave?"

"I shot at his horse," said Dave, gruffly, as they all met.

"It was your shooting skeered them, Dave. Maybe they are Stoffel's men. Now, what shall we do?"

"Inspan and trek. This is a good place to hold; but the oxen would starve, and where would we be then? Ja, trek!"

"And what say you, Clinton?"

"You know best."

"My plan is this. We have an hour to sun-down; and those men will not come back just now. We will trek now; get on the spoor of the wagon that has passed, follow it for a mile maybe, then blind our tracks, and go

clean away to the west—see? There is another water-hole on the other end of the Jagtpan Rand.”

“You can’t cover a wagon spoor.”

“I have a scheme that will throw them off.”

“Goot so. But then they will think of that other water-hole, and ride there.”

“Auch, ja.”

“Why not fill the other tank here?” said Mark; “and then you need not go to the water at all.”

“That’s it, sonny! We’ll take the wagon to the vlei, and fill it in a brace of shakes.”

This was done. The tank was filled with water that grew very thick as they neared the end, and, with half an hour of sunlight, they set off on the wagon spoor. This they followed for half a mile, to where the ground sloped gently away on the left, when the wagon was turned and backed down the slope, over a layer formed by the spare canvas and a couple of old blankets. They slowly covered about a hundred yards, when the wagon was swung round and drawn slowly by the oxen, while the three men did their best to obliterate the tracks. At another slope the same plan was repeated, and again with great pains when the old road was crossed. Beyond the road there was a stretch of sand, and here it was possible, with the aid of a few bushes, to level up behind, quite covering the spoor.

“That’s the best we can do,” said Amos, as the night shadows began to thicken.

“No good!” said Dave.

“I dunno. You see they won’t be spooring us. They’ll think we have trekked straight on—see? and they’ll be on the look out for our wagon, and they won’t

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think of the spoor until they've gone miles on the wrong track."

"Where are we going now, then?"

"If we go anywhere north-west we'll strike the dry country; but you'd best keep due west under the rand for this skoff. Go slowly, and we'll look out for rocks."

They crept on cautiously for about three hours, tied up until the morning wind came whispering out of the gloom, and then trekked into a thick cluster of kameel doorns, high enough to hide the wagon, and to allow the oxen to graze without fear of detection from a distance. After breakfast they trekked further west, then turned north up a "laagte," or depression. On emerging from this they crossed several old wagon-tracks running north-east; and Dave stopped to consider the signs.

"They make for some place that is good outspan."

"That is it, Dave; for the best water. We will leave it on our right, and keep on."

"My tog," muttered the wagon-driver, "I would like much to let my oxen have a good belly full."

"Outspan in these thorns," said Amos, "till the day grows cooler; but keep good watch. I will stay here;" and he sat down in the shade of a little bush with his face in the direction they had come.

The others went on; and while the oxen were grazing, looking like large antelopes among the thorns, Mark sat with his field-glass on the wagon-box, and Robey watched the oxen. A hot wind blew from the north, that sapped the energy, and the glare of the sun on the scorched veld dazzled the eyes. Mark was weary to his bones of the steel-blue sky, the drab monotonous country, the heat, and the wagon. He felt unwashed, his clothes stuck to him,

and he longed with a longing that grew for a bath and a bed, with the prospect of a rest thereafter, good food, and human society. Sixpence sat on the ground, cutting a thorn from out the horny skin of his sole, and as at times he raised his head he clicked his tongue savagely. He was thinking, too, of a land that had more delights—of the thick milk, and of Nosanna. Mark's eyelids dropped, and his chin fell forward.

"Opstan!"

He opened his eyes with an effort, and saw Amos kicking Sixpence, who had fallen asleep, and beckoning to Robey. Mark sat where he was; and Sixpence stood with scowling eyes.

"Inspan!"

"I'll see you blistered first," growled Robey. "These are my oxen, and I won't inspan till the morning. Now you hear."

"I year. You're talking rot."

"Who are you?" asked Dave. "I'll tell you."

"Tell away."

"Clinton!"

"Well!" said Mark, climbing down.

"Look at him!" said Dave, pointing a finger at Amos. "A nice thing he is to order a grown man about. Ain't he? I arst you."

"I don't see why we should not stay here?" said Mark.

"That's what I said," continued Dave; "and what's he say? 'Inspan,' he says, 's if he were the Lord knows who, and his uncle and aunt. These are my oxen.'"

"And very good oxen, too, Dave."

"Now, none of your soft-soap! You're not going to

argufy me into trekking till I'm ready. See there? What do you say, Clinton?"

"I should like to have a bath," said Mark, with a laugh.

"That's what I said. We want a rest and time for a rinse out of a beaker, or something."

"Been sittin' in the sun," remarked Amos.

"Now, what yer mean by that sauce—eh? Don't you go for to vex me, Silas, don't. Isn't that it, Clinton?"

"I don't think any one would be such an idiot as to trouble about following us through this desert," grumbled Mark.

"That's what I told him, the silly young goat."

"You're talking, Dave, and, if you don't mind, I'll sit down to listen." Amos sat down "Anything more?"

"Heaps, only I ain't goin' to say it now."

"That's good. Sixpence!"

No answer.

Amos rose, picked up a sjambok, and walked up to the Kaffir, who made a threatening movement with his arm. The sjambok came hissing on the man's shoulder once and again, and Amos said something in a low tone.

"Fetch the oxen in, baleka!"

"Ja, my master," said Sixpence, humbly, and ran off.

Then Amos turned and faced Dave and Mark. "I see aasvogel," he said.

Robey looked up; then his eyes, angry and narrow, were fixed on the brown face.

"Aasvogel! They sweep round and round. Below them is a burnt wagon, and around are dead oxen swollen and stiff. In the wagon and under there are white men, dead also."

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"Take care," said the driver, thickly.

"Ja; it is true! I hear the jackal cry to his mates. The ring-crow comes flying low over the trees. It is the same place." He swept a hand round. "But there is no fire by the wagon. It is no longer a wagon; it is a grave."

"Amos!"

"Ja, Dave. Stay here, and you will see no other land but this, for it is the last you will see."

"Are the others coming?"

"I have not seen them, but——"

"Well?"

"I yeard the ghon-ya calling, and I saw the little brown man. I made the sign to Sixpence, and you see how his anger went from him."

"The little brown man!" asked Mark, in amazement.

Amos looked at Dave. "I saw him. And we will inspan?"

"If you say so," said Robey, heavily.

"Ja, I say it!" and, much to Clinton's bewilderment, Robey showed a feverish impatience to get the oxen into the yoke and trek; and even when he set the span in movement he showed visible signs of anxiety. Sixpence, too, stuck close to the wagon. At the first opportunity Mark tackled Amos.

"Who is this little man you spoke of?"

"What little man?"

"That won't do," said Mark. "You treat me as if I were a passenger."

"Seems to me, Mark, you didn't act the fair thing by me just now, when Dave was workin' himself up into a blind rage."

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"That is because you don't let me see the inside of your mind. I want a reason for everything, and just now I want to know who the little man is."

"I dunno. I ain't fooling you. I dunno. You yeard the ghon-ya? Well, what is it?"

"An insect."

"A inseck! If I tole you what a little man is, you'd say he were a black beetle. Would a inseck wail 's if all the sorrows of the land were in the cry of him? Ever year a lost monkey cry—one of these yer black-faced, green-haired, long-tailed monkeys? Well, you year, and there's the same sound in his cry—that mournful, it makes you think of the shadders in a still wood."

"Who is the little man, Si?"

"There's been a many people in the land, Mark, but they been killed off by heaps and by few, one at a time and whole families together—killed off by the white men—all. They've gone, clean gone, but the spirit of 'em has gone into the dry bones of the yearth, into the kloofs and the rivers, into the little creeping things, and into the tikolosle."

"The tikolosle!"

"Ja. He is the little brown man. When he comes there is mischief—see?"

"Do you mean to tell me that this thing is a spirit, a ghost?"

"What 'd I tell you? You up an' laugh, 'cos why? 'cos you don't know."

"But look here——"

"Oh, I ain't saying any more. What's the use? You see one thing one way, I see it another, and that's all;" and Amos, catching his gun under his arm, went off whistling.

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Mark tried to draw Sixpence, but the Kaffir put him off with his everlasting "Aandias," and Robey took refuge in an obstinate spell of silence. Mark, strong in his superior wisdom, smiled to himself, but the smile died to a dry grin as he looked over the interminable veld, always and everywhere the same dry and bleached, scarred by dongas, clothed in patches by stunted thorn trees armed with spikes like grappling-irons, and tossed up here and there into bare stone ridges, from which the heat radiated in waves. Then the oxen stuck in a sand-belt, and then the canvas of the wagon tent was ripped open by wacht-en-beetje thorns, and next a tyre, after clanking horribly, came away from the wheel which had contracted under the heat. It was fixed on by thongs of hide, but set up a continuous lamentation.

"Guess we'll have to fix that, Dave!"

Robey wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead, and looked gloomily around.

"It don't matter," he growled. "Somethin's goin' to happen—something bad."

"Look at the oxen!" said Mark.

"They ain't sick, are they?"

"Better'n that!" cried Amos. "They smell something."

The oxen were standing with their heads pointing one way, and now and again they would lift their muzzles and test the warm dry air, while they kept up a low moaning.

"It's water," said Dave; "over that a way."

He brightened up, and sang out to his oxen, calling them by name as he walked beside them.

"Yek fore! trek!"

They were brought round facing west, and with their

heads tossing they tramped forward briskly. There was nothing to be seen but the same drab dismal expanse for miles, and Mark put his doubts into words.

"Isn't it a waste of time? There must be a mistake."

"There's water sure!" said Amos. "It may be a mud-hole, but it's somewhere near. And there they go!"

"Wh—what?"

"Them long-tailed partridges—Namaqua partridges—they're flying to their evening drink. See 'em over yonder?"

"No; oh yes!" and Mark clapped his field-glasses on to a little moving patch that threw off faint flashes of light as the sun struck on the beating wings.

"They're gone! no; they are wheeling—they settle—straight ahead."

"Of course," said Amos; "what'd I tell you? The ox can taste a streak o' moisture in the dry air, and tell it blows offen the water; but you can't, mor'n I. It's the same what I sed just now. A man born in the veld can tell the signs of the veld better'n one that's strange to the land."

"You're thinking of the little man, I see. But tell me this. You and Dave believe this little man is a sign of bad luck; yet we are finding water?"

"The bad luck comes if you don't take notice, and we took notice. We cleared out. There's a bit of green over there."

"Yes," said Mark, looking through his glasses, "a wide bit."

"Get out the shot-gun, and go on ahead. Just fire into the brown o' them birds—one shot'll do, an' we'll have roast partridge."

Mark, nothing loath, slipped forward with the shot-gun

for a mile or so, when he could plainly see the sheen of water. Then he crept from rock to ant-hill, and from ant-hill to bush, till he saw a carpet of birds—hundreds of them—squat-footed, with fawn-coloured feathers, some drinking, some having a sand-bath, others waiting to get at the water. He was a “pot-hunter” for the time, and committed the unsportsmanlike sin of taking them as they stood, but the “pot” was the chief thing to be studied after several days of “hard tack.” He gathered up nine and a half brace of plump birds, about the size of a quail in the body, and then stood looking with delight into a long trough of clear water, in shape like a giant bath, cut out of rock. At one end the water was a couple of feet from the rim, at the other it shelved along a slope that had been trodden down by the feet of countless game. As he gazed into the clear pool that reflected his black burnt face, freckled nose, and cracked lips, he began to shed his clothes, and when the wagons creaked up he unhooked a bucket, and treated himself to a shower bath.

“The oxen first!” sang out Robey.

“Hole on a minute, Dave! If it’s sweet water, we’ll run the ole stuff outer the tanks, and fill them first. My jimminy! it’s good. Out with the plugs, Dave, and all hands to the pump.”

“Don’t waste water, sonny. I’ll fix up a canvas tank, and it’ll do to soak the wheel in—see?”

This was done. The tanks emptied into a shallow canvas tank, and the zinc tanks refilled, after which the oxen were allowed to drink, two at a time, beginning with the pair of magnificent “achter oss,” or wheelers—the fellows who were relied upon to check the span and support the jerks of the “disselboom.” It was a treat to see

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them drink with their necks outstretched, and, after drinking, to see them crop at the herbage which stretched away in a narrow band from the pool. After this all enjoyed the luxury of a rest, and fell to their meal with heightened spirits.

“And to think,” said Mark, as he gripped a roast bird with both hands, “that we were all in the blues!”

“I b’lieve,” began Dave, with a look at his oxen, and then a stare all round.

“Well?”

But Dave was crunching bones, and said nothing.

“I guess,” said Amos, “that Van Snaar has found out before this that we’ve given him the slip. And we’ve got to reckon with Rooi Stoffel.”

“At any rate, we’ve come well out of it so far, thanks to you, Si.”

“Have this fat one, Mark?”

“I don’t mind if I do.”

“I b’lieve,” repeated Dave, glaring at the fire and picking out a partridge stuck full of cinders.

“Don’t hurry, old man.”

“Catch, Sixpence!”

A couple of birds flew to Sixpence, and two more to the grinning leader.

“What I were going to say,” said Dave, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “when you chaps stopped me, is this—that this yer pool is a townaar’s plaat. There’s no wagon spoor about.”

“Eh?” said Mark.

Amos looked around, startled. “He means there is something queer about the place, something spooky.”

Mark laughed heartily.

The First Attack

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“Laugh, you red-necked, freckled-nosed donder-kop,” said Amos. “But tell me, do you see wagon spoor about? It is as Dave says—the place must have a bad name.”

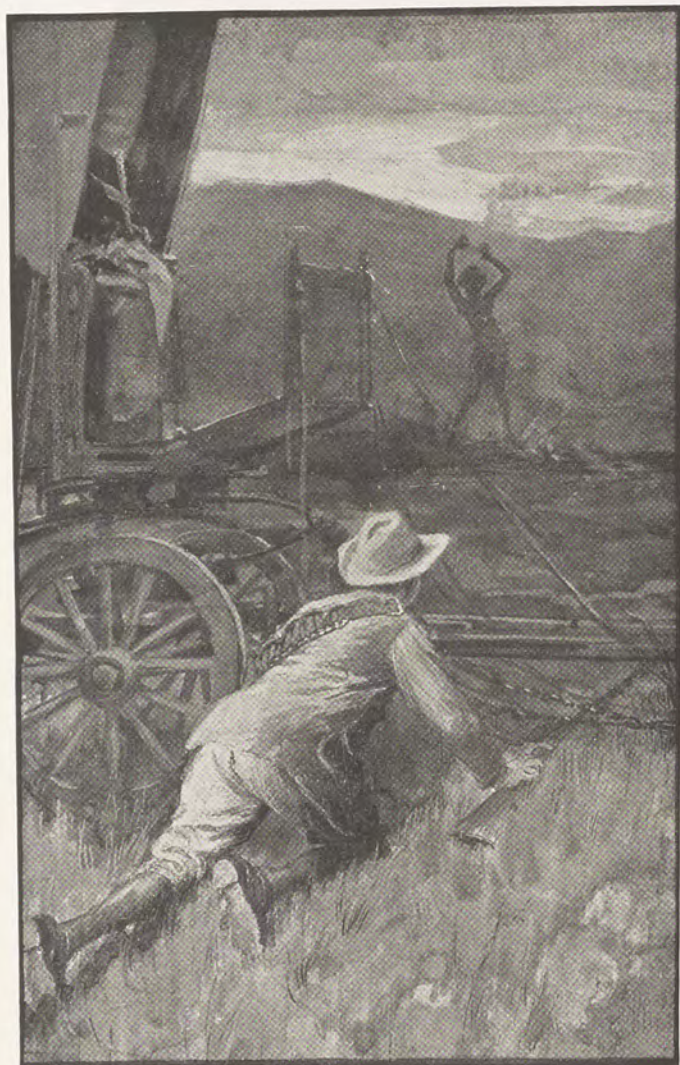
“All the better for that, you lantern-jawed, long-haired scarecrow; for we may be left alone.”

CHAPTER XVII

A STRANGE CRY

And they were left unmolested. The night passed without incident, except a slight upset to Mark's nerves. In the morning, it is true, they saw a solitary horseman in bold relief far off on rising ground, looking in their direction, but he rode away to the north-east, and they set to work overhauling the wagon, and reclinching the loose tyre.

As to Clinton's experience, he was taking the second watch about three in the morning—the most melancholy hour on the veld, when there is just light enough to see objects without sufficient to distinguish what they are. He was sitting at the top end of the pool, with his gun over his knees, listening to the heavy breathing of his sleeping companions, and to the soft calls of the grey muishonds who were hovering near, when he heard the waters stir. The noise was slight, such as would be made by a water-rat, and it was repeated at intervals, as if some such small animal were crossing the pool. He could see nothing, and presently the sound ceased, when another sound reached him, the noise of crunching bones, accompanied by faint snarls or moans. Turning his head, he made out some object moving about the embers of the fire. The creature, whatever it was, began scraping the embers, when the



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“HE CREPT GENTLY TOWARDS IT”



noise of eating recommenced, and Mark knew it had raked out an "askookie," or damper of meal baked under the ashes. He crept gently towards it, but when he was near the thing vanished mysteriously. He stood up, feeling rather queer as he gazed about, for it seemed to him that for an instant he had seen a human being, very small and quite naked. He struck a match, and made out in the white ash the print of a little hand.

"It must," he muttered, "have been a monkey," and with this explanation he went back to his post. But the creature was still about. Several times he heard the sound of eating, but, though he tiptoed about, he could detect nothing, and the thing worked on his nerves.

At breakfast-time Dave dug his clasp-knife into the ashes.

"Some one's been eatin' my 'kookie."

"A monkey," said Mark, hesitating. "He came to the fire in my watch."

Dave shook his head. "I guess," he said reprovingly, "that monkey wore boots."

"I tell you it was a monkey!" said Mark, hotly.

"All right, sonny. I ain't blaming you. I'd 'a eaten it myself," and Dave satisfied himself with biltong.

The oxen were kept away from the water till the afternoon, when they drank copiously, and just before sun-down a start was made for the long trek through the thirst-land. As they were leaving the pool, Mark saw Amos place a stick of biltong near the ashes, and a twist of tobacco.

"What's that for?"

"The monkey," said Amos, with a queer look.

"I didn't know monkeys smoked."

"There's a lot of things you don't know, bootie;" and they moved off.

When they had covered a quarter of a mile or so, they all stopped to look back, for from the pool came a prolonged call, beginning softly, raising to a loud pitch, and then dying away—a cry that was half-human, half-animal, but intensely mournful.

"It is some one in pain calling," muttered Mark.

"Ja. It is the spirit."

"Ou ay," said Amos. "It means what?" and he faced about to the "droogte," the land of bleached bones, where there was often no rain for a space of five years at a stretch, a land bathed now in the glorious flush of crimson light, that touched up the gaunt ribs of the rock-strewn hills, and rippled over the blistered veld.

"Trek!" cried Dave, and the oxen went on with clattering hoofs.

They crossed a broad depression, which had been a "pan," or shallow lake, breasted a bare ridge, and went down beyond, facing for a brilliant star that hung low down the heavens, which in a twinkling had blazed out as though some mighty battery had been suddenly switched on.

There was no beaten track in that wilderness, and the wagon was held to its course with many deviations to avoid obstacles, or as a ship at sea by the old mariners who steered by the stars. It was in this work that Dave Robey had acquired his silent habits, and henceforth he spoke but little, being absorbed in his duties. The order was to trek as far into the night as possible, and then in the early morning, letting the oxen rest through the heat of the day. They made about five miles that night, and

about ten the next morning, when the oxen were outspanned, to pick up what food they could from the scant herbage, while the men gathered about a feeble fire from a little store of wood gathered previously in the thorns. Mark hauled out the medicine-chest, and administered a dose of quinine all round.

"Seen that there what's-'s-name again, Mark?"

"I saw something," said Mark, slowly. "What it was I don't know, but it picked up a bit of biscuit and it drank from the beaker. Then it seemed to disappear among the oxen."

"My ghoisters!" growled Dave.

"Don't feel queer, do you, Clinton?"

"I'm right enough, Amos."

"So? Well, look here. When that there thingummy comes round, don't you watch him. A Kaffir will cover his eyes up when it's about—see? 'Cos why? 'Cos it ain't lucky to see him."

"I'd like to know what it is."

"You leave it alone," said Amos, earnestly. "Maybe it ain't but nothing at all, and it don't leave any spoor."

But Amos was wrong, for that evening, when they trekked, Mark saw a tiny footprint in a patch of sand—a human footprint—and, about dusk, when he was seated on the wagon-box, he distinctly made out a little dark figure looking back at the wagon. He marked the spot, and, when the wagon reached it, he jumped down to inspect. There was the same little footprint, and he began to ask himself whether, after all, there were not such things as "little brown men." In his watch that night he kept a very sharp outlook, but without success, and next morning they were all busy giving the oxen

their first drink from the tanks and their first feed of oil-cake, which at first they mouthed with much reluctance. There was a change, too, in the veld. In place of the dreary flats the horizon was broken by a detached barrier of rock, split and worn into valleys and narrow defiles. They had decided to go round, making a wide *détour*, when some fifteen miles to the north-east, and in their track as they kept on, they discovered by accident a wagon outspanned. Its canvas tent, stained yellow, so matched the veld that the eye could have rested on it and passed on unregardful, if Amos had not caught a bright twinkle as of fire. Taking the field-glass, he saw a wagon half hidden by a belt of sand, but beyond the twinkle of light, which appeared only a moment or two, there was no sign of life about the spot.

"Guess we won't go that way," said Amos; "but how we goin' to get through these hills if we keep on straight?"

"Nohow; that's how."

"There's the other way round," observed Mark, pointing to the left.

"Bends too far south. I tell you what, me an' Dave'll go and see if there's a way through, while you keep camp, Mark."

They shouldered their rifles and went off. Amos with merely a shirt and veldschoens on, Dave in a pair of mole-skin breeches, flannel shirt, and veldschoens.

Mark rigged up a shelter over the wagon-box, and with his rifle beside him and his field-glasses in his hand, he sat down for a long spell of watching and waiting. Beyond a few gnarled tufts of leafless scrub, there was not a vestige of herbage, and the shadows

cast by the oxen as they stood about, dispirited, made inky splashes on the burning ground, over which scurried large black ants, searching for something which apparently they never found. Sixpence and the leader slept beneath the wagon. The two figures dwindled to little specks, then disappeared into the rocky jaws of a ravine. Mark smoked his pipe out, refilled it, and puffed away with the silence of the desert heavy on his spirits. Then he walked round the wagon to see how things were to the rear. There a pillar of red dust was dancing madly, with miles of plain for its platform, till, as if exhausted, it collapsed and spread into a cloud, which slowly sank to the earth. He returned to his box seat, and swept the blank horizon till his eyes ached. So the hours went by, and the shadows marched round the standing oxen, passed under their bellies, and crept out on the other side. All the time the heat quivered from the ground, and the little stunted bushes, as time went on, seemed to be dancing. One of them held his attention; its appearance was so fantastic, with branches like stunted arms, that pointed at him. But surely! He rubbed his eyes, closed them, then looked again. A pair of little sharp eyes were blazing at him through the bush! Then a head appeared, and he saw a little wizened face.

"By Jove!" he gasped; "the little brown man!" and he grasped his gun.

The face disappeared, and he put the gun down. Then he reached behind for a bottle of cold tea, the only beverage that keeps deliciously cool, and took a sip. The face reappeared. Mark held the bottle up, and the little man opened his mouth. Mark climbed down, and placed the bottle, with a stick of biltong, on the ground, and went

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back to his perch. When he had reached it and looked round, the bottle had gone, and the bush was only a bush again.

“Well, I’m hanged!” he muttered, and after a pause he walked out to the bush. There was nothing but a shallow hole. There was no spoor on the sand around, but how, or when, or where had the strange creature disappeared? He went back to resume his watching with frowning brows and a mind groping for an explanation of the mystery. Out of the rocks presently emerged the little figures, and he called out to Sixpence to get coffee ready.

“Ek is mos (quite) dood,” said Amos, flinging himself down in the shade.

“Ek ook,” growled Dave; “but it is time the oxen had their water.”

“Be careful, Dave! How much can they have, Mark?”

“Two pints each,” said Mark. “They waste the oil-cake, Dave, and we’d better break up each share and mix it with half the share of water.”

CHAPTER XVIII

RED STOFFEL

It took an hour to water the span from the single bucket, but there was no waste, as every crumb and drop was licked up. It was decided, as a result of the inspection of the hills, to push straight on, and in the evening, under cover of the dark, they trekked into the mouth of a gorge to be ready at sunbreak. The first streak of dawn found them on the move, and for a mile or so they went ahead in comfort. Then their difficulties began. The walls of the valley narrowed in, and great boulders barred their way, while very soon the heat grew stifling. They outspanned, held a council of war, and after a careful inspection of the obstacles ahead, decided to retreat in the afternoon. That done, they posted Dave on the hill to keep watch over the plains until noon, when he was relieved by Mark. When the intolerable heat had moderated, the others turned the wagon round and made ready to inspan. But they were not to escape so easily, and while the oxen were being lined up, Mark descended to report the appearance of a party of horsemen.

"They are at our last camp, and one man is riding this way. I was looking for them to the north-east, and they must have come from the south."

"Been following our tracks," said Amos. "Well, I guess they've got us fast this time."

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"Ja, dood fast," said Dave.

"Anyhow, we'll hear what the chap that's coming has to say;" and they stood about with heavy hearts, after sending Sixpence up to keep watch, and after driving the oxen into the largest of a number of caves. Sixpence signalled that the horseman was approaching, but he came very slowly until he saw the little group, when he held up both hands, palm outwards, and advanced carelessly. It was the same bearded Boer they had seen twice before.

"Daag!" he said, dismounting and shaking each of the three by the hand in a limp fashion.

"Daag, oom! Tabak!"

"Ne, neef; maar een beaker vater as' bliff?"

"Water is daarom scarce," said Amos. "Dave, see if there is a drop in the vaitje."

There was a drop, and Dave poured it out and offered it with a weary smile. It was not enough to wet the man's lips.

"I think," said Amos, "we will soon know what thirst is."

"Ja. Ek dink so," said the Boer, grimly.

"But there is still food to eat, oom, if you will."

"Ne, dank."

All had been said that was demanded by courtesy. The next word would be about the reason of the visit, but Amos filled his pipe instead, and sat down calmly.

"It looks to me, neef," said the Boer, with a dry smile, "that neef has run into a hole."

"How so, oom?"

The Boer shrugged his shoulders. "Must I tell you what you already know? Well, you have no water, no grass. You cannot go on or turn back."

"But we are going back to the nearest water, which we can reach in two treks."

"Is that your thought?"

"Ja, oh ja. We will go back and try another path when the oxen have picked up. Why can't we get out?"

The Dutchman smiled grimly. "You make sport, neef; but you know your trek is finished. You played a slim trick over there; but we have you fast. My men are out there on the veld."

"You are Rooi Stoffel."

The Boer nodded.

"So?" said Amos, with a drawl and a long stare. "I thought Stoffel had a red beard, but yours is not red. Maybe you are named 'Rooi' because of the people you have killed."

"I am named Rooi Stoffel," said the Boer, sternly. "That is enough. Now you know your trek is ended."

"We have no quarrel with you," said Dave.

"Quarrels are easily made, neef; but there is a little matter between us," and he turned his steady sombre gaze on Mark.

"As for that," said Amos, "it was, as you say, a little thing."

"Little or big, it matters nix. I want your wagon and oxen. Give them peacefully, and you may go. Refuse and——" He looked into each face. "Well, you know what will then happen."

"Suppose," said Amos, picking up a pebble and tossing it from hand to hand, "we hold you prisoner, oom?"

"If you are tired of life, neef, do so."

"So? But it seems to me that if you take our wagon,

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and set us down on the veld to die of thirst, there would be no gain to us."

"I would put you down by the nearest water."

"But it is a long walk from there for tired men—neh?"

"I want your answer. For myself I have no fear, and so speak without thought of what you would do to me."

Amos looked at Dave and then at Mark, but the young Englishman had the last say.

"This is our answer," said Mark, "and you can take it back to your men. We will make no terms with either you or them; and if you hinder us in any way, you must take the consequences."

The Boer looked at Mark's flushed face, and then turned his cold eyes on Amos.

"I want your answer."

"You have had it," said Amos, with a queer smile. "And if I were you, Stoffel, I would leave this mad Englishman alone—see? If you want a wagon, there is one over yonder. Take that."

The Dutchman stared. "But," he began, then looked at Dave. "Come, you are a man, make these boys hear sense."

Dave shook his head.

"You see," said Mark, "we have a fancy for dying our own way. Good day to you!"

"So long!" added Amos. "Give my love to Van Snaar."

Stoffel looked perplexed, then he mounted his horse, and favoured them with one of his hard looks. "You keep something back—is that it? or are you just stupid Englishers?"

"We are waiting for the grass to grow, oom," said Amos. Stoffel shrugged his shoulders, smiled a little dry smile, and rode away at a walk, never once turning his head.

"That chap has got some pluck," said Mark.

"Better'n pluck—a long head. If it had 'a been my uncle who was here, you bet he would not have taken the risk. Ja! he's ole man long kop, but he can't quite get the hang of our business."

"I suppose we won't trek to-night?"

"Not much—eh, Dave?"

"Ne," muttered Dave. "Maybe they'll try to rush us to-night. Tog! I will be glad for a long sleep."

There was no sleep that night. Each one kept watch at his own post, and to the anxiety at the danger of an attack was added a nervous apprehension of the unknown, for in the stillness of the night, more profound there than elsewhere on the veld, because there were no insect voices, the startling cry they had heard at the pool rose apparently from the cave, then again from the cliff above them, and once again from the wagon itself. Their nerves were none of the best just then, and the cry shook them terribly, so that with calls to one another they met for the comfort of company, and spoke in whispers as to the meaning of the call. As they spoke there was another sound of whimpering.

"It comes from the cave," said Mark.

"My Gott!" muttered Dave, wiping his forehead.

"Let us go and see."

"No," said Amos, alarmed.

"What's that?" said Mark, quickly. "Did you touch me?"

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"Me? no; why?"

"Oh, nothing!" but Mark glanced curiously at the ground.

"Magtig, I am all of a tremble," muttered Amos.

"Ja, kerel; I too am bang. I say it, and I was not afraid in battle."

"I have been thinking," said Mark, quietly. "You two are afraid of something you do not understand, but what you think is a spirit."

"It is a spirit."

"Well, I don't feel the same, and I'm going into the cave. I will take the lantern. I can't tell you why, but I know no harm will follow."

"We won't let you go, Mark."

"But you must. You two have done everything so far, and now it is my turn;" and Mark ran off to the wagon as the cry sounded again. He snatched up the lantern, filled a bottle of water, and the two, coming as far as they dared, saw the light disappear.

"It was wrong to let him go in, Dave."

"Dead wrong," said Dave, huskily.

Amos sat down on a stone. "If it had been anything but this, Dave; anything but the little brown man; and it is he, Dave!"

"Ja; none else."

Amos groaned. "Dave, I am going in. We three must stand by each other—eh?"

"You go."

Amos clutched his rifle and ran up with a gasp, fearing that if he did not run he would not have the courage, and Dave followed. They saw the gleam of the lantern far in.

"Mark! Mark! are you safe?"

The lantern was caught up, came bobbing towards them, and was flashed in their white faces.

"One of you go back to the wagon, and get the tin of condensed milk."

They stood glaring at him.

"Milk!" muttered Dave.

"Look sharp, man; there is a little black baby over there, dying of hunger."

"Baby!"

"If you won't go, I will."

"Ne," said Dave; and he scrambled out in a panic, convinced that Mark had gone daft.

"What is it really, Mark?" whispered Amos, hoarsely.

Mark put his firm hand on the other's trembling arm, and led him to a little bed of hides on which lay, truly enough, a very small black child, whose great black eyes blinked at the light.

Amos glanced shrinkingly around. "Is that all?"

"No; there is something else—look."

He flashed the light on to a little heap of ashes, by the side of which lay the putrid and swollen body of a sand puff-adder, and two little sticks—one pointed, the other with a black hole in the centre.

"Ghoisters!" exclaimed Amos. Then he picked up the two sticks. "Bushman," he said; and whistled softly.

"Bushman!"

"Ja, sonny; and a jolly sight better'n what I thought it were; though a Bushman ain't a Sunday-school tea fight. That's so."

"How do you know?"

"Know? Why, ain't these Bushman fire-sticks? and

ain't that snake Bushman poison? Just you keep quiet, while I think this thing out."

Dave came back with the pot of milk, still in a state of tremendous fear; but the spectacle of a little black baby drinking milk out of a spoon restored his nerves.

"Dave," said Amos, with authority, "you, being the oldest, and more like a father, will carry that critter to the wagon."

"Eh?"

"Ja. I've thinked it over. I seen the Bushman who's maybe father to that young 'un over at the pool, and in between. So did you; so did Mark. We, being what we are, thought it was the tikoloshe. Mark didn't. Well, if that Bushman had meant us harm, he'd 'a done it—see? Not meaning us harm, but meaning something, he means us to take keer of this baby. Though a Bushman, maybe he's got feelings, and if we look after his young maybe he'll do us a good turn. Anyway, he won't hurt us—see? So you pick him up, if it's a he."

"It's a he," said Mark, gravely.

"That's luck," growled Dave. "We don't want any wimmin about;" and he picked up the bundle.

Mark led the way with the lantern, and Amos brought up the rear. The baby was wrapped and put to bed by his nurse in the wagon. The lantern was left burning; and the flap of the sail turned back.

"We'll just get away off," said Amos; "and the picaniny's dad can peep in and see that all is right."

CHAPTER XIX

THE DEATH IN THE NIGHT

They were no more disturbed in the night, but by the faint grey light of the dawn they saw a huddled figure lying by a stone within a few feet of the wagon.

Robey, who had looked on death before, was the first to recover. He advanced slowly, and turned the figure over. When he turned his face to the others it was white and drawn.

"A Boer," he muttered hoarsely.

The others came closer. Dave stooped and picked up a tiny arrow.

"The Bushman!" cried Amos.

"Ja. He was killed by the Bushman."

"But why? When? We heard no noise."

Robey shook his head.

"What is that on the ground? A dynamite fuse, by George! It leads to the wagon;" and Amos, running forward, took something from the axle, and held it up.

"Dynamite!" he said.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mark.

They looked at each other in silence at the thought of what would have happened—the flash; the explosion; the wreckage of their home—and all that would follow; the madness of thirst, and the ruin of their mission, if death itself did not overtake them.

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Then Amos went to the wagon and peeped in. "The little jonker is here still," he said, with relief.

"The arrow took him in the neck," said Dave. "He must have died soon. He just staggered to a stone."

"Poor beggar!" said Mark, horrified and sick at heart.

"Ne, Clinton, ne; it was not fair fighting."

"But it is horrible."

"Ja; we cannot eat here. We must go. What say, Amos?"

Amos was bending over the ground, and working inch by inch.

"Look at him!" whispered Robey. "He is spooring. Look, you will see something."

"Let us bury this first."

"No. Better let it alone. If his friends come they can see how he died, lest they say we killed him."

Amos circled round the wagon slowly, and then moved to the side of the valley, up which he went about halfway, when he moved along the face of the valley, round a bend, out of sight.

"There!" said Dave. "A dog could not follow a spoor better. Well, I will see to the baby."

Mark wondered at the apparent indifference shown by his companions in the presence of that huddled figure, and taking a pick, he began digging a pit for the body in the hard ground, regardless of Robey's rough wisdom. He had finished his task when Amos returned.

"It's all right," he shouted. "Round with the wagon again, and inspan! We can trek halfway up the hill, then keep along a ledge which leads down into an open track."

They worked with a will, being anxious to quit that

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spot, and asked no questions till the most difficult part had been covered, when they wished to know how Amos had found the way out.

"It were the Bushman again. I just followed his spoor."

"But how did you follow the spoor?"

"Ever seen gipsy sign in England? No. Well, you've heard that there are signs, and tramp signs, too? Well, out yer there are spooring signs, by which a man can let his friends know which way he went. I guess I saw them signs."

"What are they like?"

"They're not 'xactly like a bee's foot no more 'n they like a elephant.

" 'Baby, Baby Bunting,
Daddy's gone a-huntin',
To get a little rabbit-skin,
To wrap the little babby in.'"

Hark to the baby callin' out."

"Guess he'll eat us out of house and home," said Dave.

"What you goin' to call him, Dave?"

"Dunno."

"Call him Mascot," suggested Mark.

"Whose cot?"

"Mascot, you idiot. Means good luck, and that sort of thing."

" 'Op te doodle daddy oh!
David's got a babby, oh!
Wrop him up in calico,
And send him off to Jericho,'"

sang Amos. "Good luck! You're right there, Mark. Think o' the wagon blown sky-high—eh? But we're not

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outer the wood, be gosh. That uncle o' mine is a jolly sight meaner than Stoffel. We ain't done with him, and we ain't done with Stoffel, and we ain't done with the droogte."

"It's a good thing we've got them tin pots of yours, Si," said Dave, coming out of the wagon. "That little cus is just blowin' himself out with milk and water. I say!"

"Well?"

"These rocks give me the blues. They're just full of caves and puff-adders and shadders. I'm goin' to trek clean through into the plain."

"All right."

"And what's goin' to happen then? Tell me that, Si."

"Well, soon 's we get into the veld the fellows with the wagon we saw over yonder will see us. They'll send up a signal to Stoffel, who's waiting back of us; and if they've got enuff water for their horses, why then they'll attack us, maybe at sun-up."

"That's it," said Dave. "You'd 'a made a good raider, Amos. Year that kid again? Say!"

"Go ahead."

"About that kid." Dave puffed at his pipe as he walked beside his oxen.

"Yes."

"I been thinking;" and Dave's brows were wrinkled while he turned his beard up to his mouth. He walked on for several minutes, while Mark and Amos were at attention. "I've been thinking about his name. He oughter have one, and I've got one."

"Out with it!"

"Maybe you'll laugh," and Dave glanced resentfully at them; "but I guess it's a good-enough name."

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"We have not heard it."

"You see the hotter he gets the more he cries;" and Dave grinned shyly.

Mark raised his eyebrows, and Amos whistled.

"You don't catch it?" asked Dave, anxiously.

"Not by a mile, old chap."

"The hotter he gets the more he sings, so I think that 'Kettle' would do well for him. Sort of handle to him—eh?"

"Dave, you're a genius," said Mark.

The big man mopped his face and smiled with delight. "Then you agree?"

"Kettle let it be," said Amos, gravely, "and Polly for short—see?" and Polly was the stranger named henceforth.

"That being settled 'cording to the rules," said Dave, briskly, "we'll get back to the Boers. You think they'll show fight at sun-up?"

"Sure to."

"Good. Well, we'll give the oxen a good feed and a good drink to-night when we outspan, then trek at midnight for six miles, so that the Boers will have to follow us when the sun is strong. Horses can't stand this so well as oxen. I guess them Boer horses are sick enough, and by the time they reach us they'll be done up. We'll camp where there is a sluit or hollow where the oxen can stand, and give them fits."

"In that case," said Mark, "I will give the rifles a clean up, and get out a store of food and water, so that no man will be obliged to leave his post."

"Good for you, sonny."

The wagon in time crawled out on to the plain like a

great snail, and crept slowly away from the sinister hills. When about three miles out they saw far to the right some little dark objects, which were the oxen of the other wagon, and from the spot a thin column of smoke arose.

"They see us."

"Ja. We will outspan here, sleep a little, eat well, attend to the oxen, and leave a fire behind us when we trek again."

"Do you think they are watching us?" asked Mark.

"That is certain."

"Why not rig up a scherm? They would then think that we meant to stay a day or so, and would not then attack us too soon. If they came to-night instead of in the morning, it would not suit us."

"You say well," said Amos. "You two rig up the scherm while I look after little Polly."

Amos brought out the baby, who was every hour growing more like an india-rubber doll, and began to click at it and make bird-like notes.

"What you giving him?" asked Dave, stopping to peep under the big sail.

"Some meat-juice an' lemon."

"Meat-juice and lemon for a kid! I never yeard o' such foolishness."

"He ain't crying, is he? No. Well, you leave him alone. The lemon 'll keep down his fat, and the juice 'll make bones; that what. 'By-by, baby; go to slee—eep. Mummer's a lady, dada's a swee—eep.' That's him over there—that great big rawbones, who looks 's if he'd crept outer a gumpot."

"Wait 'll I fix this," growled Dave, "an' I'll 'gumpot' you."

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Amos moistened his leathery tongue, and warbled like a little "blackhead," one of the sweet songsters of the veld; then he sent Sixpence for a lump of butter, and rubbed it over the black skin till it glistened.

"What you doing now?"

"Goin' to fry him," said Amos, scornfully. "Don't you know that's how to keep the skin sof", so it won't blister? Ghoisters! for a parent you beat all. Elephants, he's bit me!"

"Serve you right. Give him to me;" and Dave placed one big paw under the little bare back and began a see-saw.

"I claim first tooth," cried Amos, after sucking his fingers.

"What's that?"

"First tooth! It means somethin' for me—a gold watch 'll do, and you've got to pay it. What's that you've got, Mark?"

"Plum-pudding, my boy, and after that half a pound of raisins each, some apricot stuff—mebos, I think."

"Them's trimmings. Anything before?"

"What do you say to soup, bully beef, and compressed vegetables, with some dried apples in to give a flavour?"

"Sounds fine and smells good," said Amos.

"No eating," said Dave, firmly, "till we've fed the oxen. Look at 'em asking a question." He placed Polly on a kaross by the fire, and got out a good half of the oil-cake. Amos whistled to the oxen the soft Kaffir cattle-whistle, and the big yellow fellows came up, swinging their heads and lowing softly. First the dust was wiped out of their nostrils and mouths with moist rags, and then they were tied up, the ground swept, the cake put down,

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and when they had eaten, each had an allowance of half a bucket of water. Before they had finished the other wagon had inspanned and they marked its slow progress by the moving cloud of dust. The course taken would intersect their own line of direction at a point about five miles distant.

"Goin' to head us off."

"Ja. Lay that fore yoke about three yards to the left. We can take the star points from there and swing her round on a line that will clear them by a couple of miles."

"That's it, Si. Guess they've got a dog-tired span from the rate they're goin', and they're using the whip. Year the crack?"

Through the still air there came little snapping sounds, and at intervals the groaning of the wagon.

"They will hear us moving," said Mark. "The ground is like a sounding-board. How far do you think they must trek before they cut our line?"

"'Bout six miles, and it'll take them nearer three hours than two."

"Then, why not trek while they are moving? They would be less likely to hear us."

"Say, Dave," said Amos, with a grin, "the young 'un's beginning to find his second wits. That's a good point."

"Darn good."

So, instead of waiting until midnight, they were on the move half an hour after sun-down, leaving a bright fire behind, and holding on a course slightly to the left. Amos went on ahead, about half a mile, with Sixpence about halfway between him and the wagon. In the complete stillness of the night, the jolting of the other wagon and

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the clap of the whip could be distinctly heard, and at times the echo of the driver shouting at the oxen. Whenever the sounds ceased, Amos gave the cry of a jackal, which Sixpence repeated, whereupon Robey brought his span to a halt, by which they trusted that the other party would not hear that they were on the move. Moreover, their wagon was not so heavy, and did not creak and groan, by reason of the springs. The jackal called that night very often, for as the time went by the other wagon stopped at shorter intervals, while as the lines of route drew nearer, the sounds were much clearer. The violent abuse launched by the driver in kitchen Dutch, which is the only language the South African trek ox understands, could be plainly heard, and Dave listened gravely with the air of a critic.

"Mafotee, that man can use his tongue and his whip, but even so he is using his oxen sleg (bad)."

"They can't keep on much further, I should think," whispered Mark, for the nearness was growing exciting.

"Hear the oxen blow! They are altogether 'gedaan' (done up)."

Once more there came the angry sound of the whip and there was another trek, which proved to be the last, for presently all sounds ceased, and a flicker of light looked out to the right. Amos came back.

"Well, Si, what you think?"

"I guess they're too near, Dave."

"That's so. Won't it do if we tie up till near sun-up, then make a quick skoff till we find the best camping-ground. What you say, Mark?"

"It seems to me all depends on whether Stoffel's men will, as you think, go to our last camp; but things don't

always happen as we wish, and if in the morning there are horsemen with that wagon, they would catch us on the march, and shoot down our oxen."

"That is so."

"Well, then, we must either trek now, and run the risk of being heard and followed, or camp right here."

"If we camp here they can prevent us moving."

"They can't go without water."

"That's so. And they're worse off than we are."

It was a very ticklish problem, and they stood for some time, raising one difficulty after another.

"Let us leave it to Polly," said Mark, with a laugh. "Wake him up, and if he cries we trek, if he doesn't we stay."

"Hark!" said Amos. "Hanged if the little chap ain't awake and talking!"

From the tent there came an unmistakable cooing sound, coupled with a strange clicking.

"B'lieve there's some one there," muttered Dave. "Don't look, Mark. Better leave the thing alone if so be it's he who has come back, though where he's come from, and how, beats me."

They stood listening, and their thoughts went back to the Dutchman, whose stealthy progress had been watched by one more stealthy than himself. The little soft animal-like sounds ceased, but they could hear no sound of any one leaving the wagon, neither was any one there.

"Polly's gone," cried Mark, who was the first to climb up.

Dave lit a match to satisfy himself, and by the reflection of it their faces showed the consternation they felt at the loss of their mascot.

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"That settles it."

"Ja," muttered Dave, lifting up a kaross and feeling under the blankets.

"He's taken the baby. 'Cos why? 'Cos he thinks we're in a hole."

"Ja. Maybe he's left a sign, Amos."

"Maybe; but I can't see in the dark. Anyway I'll try him."

They jumped out, and stood waiting for Amos to begin, and wondering what he would do.

"Just you listen," he said, and gave a prolonged melancholy cry, half-hoot, half-howl—the call of the black-faced monkey. It rolled away over the veld; but no answer came out of the darkness. They fell into another half-hearted discussion, with disjointed sentences, broken off in the middle while they stopped to listen, and Amos howled again.

"By the Lord, stop it!" growled Dave. "Gives me the creeps."

"I yeard something."

"You'll hear a rifle crack outer the dark—that's what."

"There it goes again."

"Eweh," said Sixpence, "the little man calls 'gapaiyah,'" and he pointed to the south.

"No; over there;" and Amos pointed north, while from his mouth wailed the melancholy call.

"The oxen will tell," said Dave, lurching wearily forward, with the rest at his heels in a cluster. The oxen were all facing one way, and one of the "fore osse" was chewing something.

"Jimminy!" cried Dave, excitedly, "he's chewing one

of them wild pumpkins," and he stooped down to examine the ground. "There's none here."

"I see," said Amos, with the same excitement; "that's why they're looking that way."

"Wild pumpkins!" He said it in the tone that a shipwrecked sailor would give the news of a sail in sight.

"If you fellows don't tell me what has happened, I'll hit some one," said Mark.

"Pumpkins, man alive! Bushman brought it. Means grub for the oxen. I say, Dave, better let the span take their own line."

"Ja, trek fore!" And without any further hesitation they trekked, putting their trust in the solitary veld-gourd that had gone down the throat of the big leading ox.

"Yak!" cried Dave, and the fore-loopers, with a toss of their heads, set off into the dark slightly to the left. For an hour they held on with increasing signs of eagerness, until they pulled up and began nosing the ground.

"Pumpkins!" yelled Dave.

Amos and the two blacks circled about in the dark, finding out the extent of the patch and the nature of the ground about.

"Pull up over here, Dave," cried Amos, and the wagon moved forward a couple of hundred yards.

"That's it. There's a sluit close by, and I guess we can drive the oxen in, close up both ends with the yokes, and chuck 'em in some of those pumpkins."

Dave went off to inspect the sluit, and decided it was just the place, being deep enough to shelter the oxen, and wide enough for one ox between the walls, and long enough for the whole span. They were led into the

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cutting one by one, yokes were placed across at the ends, and a supply of the little fleshy gourds was thrown down. The wagon was drawn up broadside on to the bank of the sluit above the oxen, and Sixpence, with a Martini carbine, was placed on guard in the sluit itself below the oxen, with a bottle of water stiffened with brandy, a stick of tobacco, and some food. Amos built himself a little fort between the hind wheels of the wagon, and Mark between the fore wheels, while Dave, with two bandoliers strapped over his breast, a haversack well-filled with food, and a water-bottle at his waist, sat down to a quiet smoke, waiting for the morning before taking up his position.

"It would be funny if they don't attack us, after all," said Mark, as he used a pick to deepen an outer trench.

"Well, sonny, I've heard of funnier things."

"Say!" It was Amos announcing a discovery.

"What's up?"

"It's back again—that's all."

"Not the mascutty?"

"The same, and humming like a bluebottle. I don't believe he's solid. Can't be. One moment he's gone, and the next he's back again with a smile like a split water-melon. It's witchcraft. That's what. Chaps!"

"Go ahead!"

"Believe he's a ghon-ya. If you was to stick a pin into him, he'd just sizzle down to nothing."

"Don't you dare, Si Amos. Gimme him."

"Come and take it yourself."

Dave clambered into the wagon, and by-and-by came out with a bundle, which was, from the sounds, the Bushman baby restored once more to its foster-father.

"There's something round his neck—a bit of string,

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with a bit of lappy (rag) tied up, and something in it—something hard.”

“Let’s see.”

“Strike a match inside your hat. That’s it!”

The match flickered up, and three white faces bent down over the little black object. A string of gut was round its neck, and attached to it a dirty bit of rag, wrapped round something.

“Maybe it’s a charm,” said Amos; but Mark with his knife cut the string, and a sparkle of light glistened in the palm of his hand.

“Diamond!” gasped Amos. He struck another match, and each took the stone, which was about the size of a marble, and of a pale straw colour.

“A Vaal River diamond, from the colour.”

“A diamond,” said Amos again. “There’s some meaning in that.”

“The most likely thing is that the father has placed the diamond there out of gratitude,” said Mark.

“Them people ain’t got no gratitude. No; that ain’t the reason. There’s something more. Maybe the Bushman—if he is a Bushman—knows where we are going, and where the diamonds are hid.”

“How can he?”

“How does he come and go? Tell me that. We’ll just put that thing back, and leave the kid as we found him.”

“That’s kinder foolish, Si.”

“No, ’taint, Dave. We’ve got to find what’s behind this kid’s mind.”

“What’s Polly got to do with it?”

“That’s it. Maybe everything. S’pose that ain’t a baby at all, but his father?”

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"His own father?"

"Ja, father and baby and Bushman and Tikoloshe, all rolled up in one."

Dave hastily gave the baby to Mark. "Put it in the wagon."

Mark laughingly went off with the child, and placed it comfortably on the pile of rugs, well protected from chance bullets by the armoured belting.

CHAPTER XX

THE SECOND ATTACK

When the sun came up like a fiery face from behind a red handkerchief, there was no sign of life about the wagon, and a man, lying behind an ant-hill, encouraged by the stillness, gradually raised himself to his knees and then to his feet. He stood for some time staring.

"No fire, no oxen," he muttered, "no nothing."

He rubbed his chin and looked behind him. Far away were some little moving specks on the veld. He waved his rifle to them frantically, but as they paid no attention, he started off briskly towards a second wagon which stood between him and the sun, throwing a shadow almost to his feet, a mile away. After a few steps he slackened speed, looked back over his shoulder, then stooped, and unwinding a dirty pugaree from his battered felt hat, tied it to his gun. This done, he turned about again and proceeded steadily towards the silent camp, till another spasm of uncertainty put the brake on his feet. He stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other, craning his neck, stooping down and screwing up his eyes, the better to examine the object.

"It's their wagon, sure enough," he muttered. "But there's no fire, and there's no oxen, and, blow me, there's no yokes. Maybe they've left the wagon."

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He slowly advanced a few more yards. "Maybe they've used the cattle as pack-oxen, and gone off straddle-legged. If so, they couldn't take everything, and I'd like to have first haul 'fore them Dutchies come."

He edged nearer and nearer, with his ears pricked, his eyes gleaming with excitement, and his lips trembling.

"Not a sight or a sound. They're surely gone—surely;" but he stood swaying between eagerness and fear. Then he looked behind him, and saw that the specks were taking shape. "They'll be mad," he grinned, "at being fooled." Again he stared at the wagon, and cleared his throat.

"Halloa!" he said, in a hoarse whisper; then louder, "Halloa!" but no reply came, and he went nearer, till he came to the patch of gourds.

"By Jinks! punkins! What a find! But why the blazes did they run when they had this fodder for the oxen? Been picking 'em, too! Thunder, if they're there all the time!" and he cast a startled look at the wagon.

"Billy Brent."

The man swung round.

"Stop, you fool! stop! So? Mornin', Billy!"

Brent breathed heavily, and held his gun up with a trembling hand.

"Find it heavy, eh, Billy? Well, put it down. Put it down!"

The gun was put down.

"Flag o' truce," he muttered, then pulled himself together and lounged heavily forward.

"No further. Answer my questions, and you may go. Are Rooi Stoffel and Van Snaar Futter working together?"

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"For a time, yes."

"How much did it cost to square Stoffel?"

Mr. Brent laughed. "Just your wagon and outfit, Van Snaar helping Stoffel to get the same."

"Do they mean to attack us?"

"I reckon they do talk of getting even."

"They expected to find us at our old camp—eh?"

Billy chuckled hoarsely. "You're a deep un, you are. I heard you trek last night, and I allowed as how you were giving 'em the slip."

"Giving who the slip?"

Billy jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "They were calculating to catch you over yonder."

"Now, Billy Brent, would there be any good in our making terms with Stoffel and Van Snaar?"

Brent scratched his chin. "It's this way. If you fight, well, they'll be all the madder. If you don't fight it won't hurt so much, but the end'll be about the same. That's how I figure it."

"Thanks. You can go, but don't trouble to take your gun, and just drop that bandolier."

"Flag o' truce," growled Brent.

"A flag of truce does not come under arms."

Brent's eyes ranged over the wagon. "Where's your oxen gone?"

"Haven't you seen them?" was the sharp answer.

"Me seen 'em?"

"Yes, the span and the driver, Dave Robey."

"What! Robey gone, too—him as can shoot so well?"

"Don't tell Van Snaar."

Brent grinned. "Look here," he said, "you give in to me, see, and I'll stand by you. There's my word on it."

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You surrender to ole Billy Brent, and, by gum, he's your friend. He'll save your skins, that I will—s'elp me."

"It's good of you, Brent, but we'll take our chances," said Mark.

"Halloa, Englishman! S'render to Billy Brent, my boy!"

"Scoot!" said Amos.

"Mister Clinton; take a ole pal's advice."

"Voetsack! If you don't I'll have to tie you up to the wagon-wheel as a prisoner, and you might get hit."

"Mark my words," said Brent, over his shoulder, as he slouched off, "you'll come to a bad end, the end of a sjambok—see?"

Amos went out, and returned with a Lee-Metford, stamped with the broad arrow and number.

"Why did you tell the fellow that thumping cram about Robey and the oxen being missing?" asked Mark.

"Did I tell him that? Well, you've seen a Kaffir footpath, all twists and kinks. That's the way I think, 'Gin-gin-ga-pai-ah,' round the corner. And that's the way them chaps think. When they year that the oxen are gone, and Dave is missing, they'll think we are at the end of everything, and they'll come romping in 's if they'd only to arst for our lives and we'd lay down and die. There's Stoffel and Van Snaar riding up to Billy Brent. Billy will arst for a drink, fust go off. There, what I tell you? Van Snaar's handing out his flask. Now he'll say what a narrer escape he had, and how he'd 'a taken us single-handed if he hadn't lost his gun."

"There are only seven of them altogether; and their horses look done up."

"Ain't had no water. See the hollows under the ribs.

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They'll come on on foot, I bet. They're dismounting now. How do you feel, Mark?"

"How do you feel?" said Mark, edging down into his trench.

"Bad," said Amos. "Feel awful stuffy and short of breath. I ain't no fighter."

They lapsed into silence, and watched the men advancing leisurely with weapons carelessly held—opening out as they advanced, always with a little bit of cover before them. A little puff of dust was whipped up near the feet of Stoffel, who led; and almost before the report reached them, each man was flat on the ground. Mark glanced round at his companion.

"Why did you fire so soon?"

"Got the jumps. Keep your head down. Ghoisters!"

A wooden splinter spun into the air, and the bullet smashed against one of the springs, making it hum. Then for a few minutes they flattened themselves down while the bullets rang against the iron sheathing or ripped through the canvas.

"Well, that's over," said Amos, with a sigh. "Reminds me when I had a tooth drawn. What we got to do is to jaag 'em over to Dave. Just shoot quick and short to stop them rushing, and I'll do the aiming. Then they'll try to get round us, and ole Dave 'll wake 'em up."

"Right you are," said Mark, and putting his rifle out, he took several snap-shots in quick succession at any object he saw on the veld.

"Dodge down."

Mark went flat again as the fire was concentrated on his part of the wagon, whereupon Amos replied with three well-directed shots wherever he saw a puff of smoke.

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"Have you loaded?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll blaze away this time at one spot I got in my eye, and you look out for the puff, and take careful aim this time. What you're sighting?"

"Five hundred."

"Make it three. Ready, now!" and Amos emptied his chambers at one mark out on the flat. "Guess I got him," he yelled.

Mark's rifle snapped out at an ant-hill to the left, where he saw a puff of smoke.

There was a pause in the fire, and they caught the sound of a few sharp orders in Dutch.

"Look out!" said Amos. "They've got some new game on."

They remained eagerly scanning the ground for some time, without seeing the slightest sign of the enemy, when from the left a couple of shots were put in.

Amos muttered under his breath, while his little brown eyes restlessly quartered the ground, and then dilated as they remained fixed on the right.

"I see," he shouted. "Never mind those chaps over there. Keep your eyes on the right. There's one," and he fired. "That's it: let 'em have it."

"I see another," cried Mark, firing, "over by that white thing. Now he's gone."

"Ja! gone back. I hope to goodness they'll give Dave a chance." And Amos in his anger almost cried.

"There are three more men coming from the wagon on foot."

"Oh Lord! and there's the thing crying for its milk."

"It's been crying a long time."

"If they'd only go round by Dave," muttered Amos, "he'd make 'em sick."

The baby's whimper rose to a scream. That was evidently heard by the Boers, for one of them laughed and another slapped a bullet into the tent. Mark stirred uneasily, then began to creep out on the side away from the enemy.

Amos stared at him. "Goin' to run?"

"Feed the baby."

"My ghoisters! let it yell! You'll be hit, certain."

Mark gave a spasmodic smile, slipped out, and ran round to the end of the wagon. As he scrambled up, some one called out, and the bullets sifted through the tent. It was one thing to get in and another matter to get out, with two or three keen marksmen waiting for him, and after he had quieted the "Kettle" with a cup of condensed milk, he hesitated to face the very real risk. He heard Amos shoot twice and yell.

"What?" he shouted.

"They're coming. Look sharp!"

Mark shut his teeth and pulled aside the canvas curtain; but the quick intellect of the Colonial saved him.

"Cut a hole in the canvas on the far side."

Mark's knife was out, and in a few seconds he wriggled through an opening between the laths, tumbled out anyhow, and crawled back to his trench.

"Plunk inter those chaps on the left!" yelled Amos, who was chewing the end of his handkerchief in his excitement.

Mark could see no one on the left, but he "plunked" at an anthill, and then at a ridge of sand. There was a lull for some minutes—more trying to their nerves than

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the spiteful hiss of bullets—then from behind came a muffled boom followed by a triumphal “Yavuma.”

“That’s Sixpence,” cried Amos. “They’re workin’ round, and some of em’s tried to crawl up the slit. It’s comin’.”

“What?”

“The end’s comin’. They’re workin’ round—well, they will rush in from both sides. It all rests on Dave now.” He put out seven cartridges in a row.

“Is Dave all right?” asked Mark, anxiously.

“Dunno. He’s one of those chaps that waits, and maybe he’ll wait too long. Year that.”

A shrill whistle sounded somewhere on the veld before them. Amos pressed his hat down; then suddenly he put his fingers to his mouth, and gave an answering whistle.

Immediately three men started up from behind their cover and made a rush forward, twisting as they ran and jumping from side to side. Mark fired twice at one on the left, and missed him clean; but Amos held his fire with his head turned as if he were listening for something behind. The three men advanced about fifty yards, then took cover, and as they disappeared there was a yell from behind, followed by the rapid reports of a rifle.

“It’s Dave!” yelled Amos, and calling to Mark to stay where he was, he crept out at the back, and opened fire, yelling frantically. “Hooray! they’re running! Hard loop, you schelms!”

The next thing Mark saw the three men jump up and run for their horses. Leaving his retreat, he ran round the wagon to see the remainder of the enemy on the run, with a puff of smoke coming at rapid

intervals from a little sand-ridge about two hundred yards to the rear of the wagon. One of the enemy was limping, another was supported by a comrade, a third was sitting on the ground, and a fourth was lying motionless. Two others were still firing from a spot on Dave's left front, and it was at these he was shooting. As Mark appeared, they also began to run, and Dave, rising from his ambush, came forward, followed by the little "leader."

"Well, sonnies," he shouted, "how goes?"

"Not a scratch."

"Goot so! Just go and pick some of those punkins. We'll give the oxen a regular fill up and trek."

He had a look at his oxen, speaking down to them where they stood patiently huddled in the deep cutting, then crossed over and shook hands.

"How's the kid, Mark? I saw you climb inter the wagon, sonny."

"It's more'n I would have done," said Si; "but he did fine."

"Well, let's get all the punkins in."

"Think we'd better trek."

"Ja, Si."

"They'll, maybe, go and water the horses first, eh."

"Ja, Si."

"Then come back."

"Come back mad right through."

"Si, the further we go, the more ground they'll have to cover."

"You've got it, young 'un."

"Well, I guess we'll wait till they have cleared off so's they can't head us off. Sun's getting high, should say it were about ten."

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"You held them off about four hours."

"As long as that?" said Mark, who was rather surprised to see how quickly Amos fell back into his placid condition after his tremendous excitement.

"Four hours! You did mighty well."

"I don't think we hit any one."

"But you skeered them."

"You did hit," said Mark, looking at the big man with frank admiration.

Dave took out his pipe and stared at it. "There's two things I can do," he said slowly—"drive oxen and shoot straight."

"Did you do much in the war, Dave?"

"Well, onct I shot a springbok, and a chap paced it off, little over seven hundred yards."

"I mean men."

"The chap who paced it off said he was durn glad I hadn't got him for a target. I give him the buck, and the General he had me in his bodyguard."

"Did you like it?"

"I dunno as I did. You see, we had to do what he did, and when he was under fire he just sat in his saddle, and it was mighty uncomfortable. That's so;" and Dave lounged away to gather in the gourds.

Sixpence, with a monkey-skin about his loins and a kerrie in either hand, was stamping his bare feet on the ground and bending his lithe body to the deep-chested chant of a song of triumph, narrating how he, the mighty warrior, had put the Boers to flight. The "leader" gathered together some dried cow-chips and gnarled roots to make a fire, and Amos sat down in the shade of the wagon, where he straightway fell asleep. Mark wanted

to talk about the fight, and work off his excitement, and Sixpence appeared to be the only member of the party who had a true sense of the fitness of things, and accordingly Mark gave his attention to the Kaffir, whereupon the warlike antics suddenly ceased. With an insidious grin and all shining with perspiration, he approached.

"You give me soupje brandy, jong bass?"

Mark, as commissary-general, poured out a drop of dop, and then dejectedly went off to help Robey gather in the "punkins."

"You fellows don't seem to think much of the fight."

"We'll brag about it some day, sonny; but now——" and Dave shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"But we beat them."

"Maybe, maybe."

"But we did."

"All right, Mark. But a little chap may hit a big man in the wind and double him up. Nex' time the big man hits first, and what then? That's so. We done our best."

"I should think we did."

"That's what I say. But it's best for a little man not to let out that he thinks himself boss; he's got to keep quiet and scoot."

"Scoot be hanged! Our duty is to attack their wagon as soon as the horsemen move off to the water."

"Just put them punkins in the wagon," said Dave, as he went off with a sackful to feed his oxen.

Later on, when the horsemen did retire, presumably to water their horses at some hole they knew of, Mark advocated his bold plan for capturing the other wagon, but the others objected flatly.

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"You've got no pluck," said Mark, hotly.

"S'pose not," said Dave, gravely.

"We've got more sense," remarked Amos; "and as for pluck, why, I did year that Dave was three days in a sluit, with five other chaps, and they held the Boers off for three days, and then were not taken. Isn't that so, Robey?"

Dave yawned.

"I may be wrong, of course," said Mark; "but it seemed to me a good chance."

"What I think——" said Dave, starting again and coming to a pause.

"Ja."

"Is this—never do what the enemy want you to do, pluck or no pluck."

"You've said it, old man, an' we'll do the other thing."

They did the other thing. In the afternoon, when the sun was still hot and the horsemen were but a blot on the plain, they inspanned and trekked.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WILD DOG AND THE CROCODILE

The next day they struck the watershed of the Orange River, and were out of the "droogte." There was very little difference between the veld they had entered on and the dreary plains they had left, as far as Mark could see; but Dave pointed to a forlorn growth of vegetation with great satisfaction. There was food for the oxen, and, moreover, they could expect to come across pools of water; at any rate, the air was cooler, and ahead they could see the first cloud that had appeared on the hard blue for a week or more. It was not much of a cloud, merely a whisp of white spun out into nothingness; but it was cooling to look at, and it held out promise of moisture.

"It's just over the Falls, I should say," remarked Amos, thickly, for he held a pebble in his mouth to keep his palate moist. "That's where the diamonds are."

"All I ask for," said Mark, "is a bath;" and he looked at his grimy hands and arms with disgust.

They were still another day without water, and then they came to a mud-hole, which appeared to contain more insect life than water; but the oxen rejoiced greatly, and lowed to each other at the smell of it. They sucked up the mud and the insects with satisfaction, and grazed eagerly on the dry herbage. The next day they struck

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into a deep valley, clothed with something that looked as if it might have been grass, and here they outspanned for a rest on the banks of a tributary of the Orange. It was really a tributary, and by digging in the sand at one spot they certainly tapped water, which welled up in quantity sufficient to fill a bucket in an hour. Mark washed his face for the first time in a week, and Dave, after shaking his head at the wicked waste of water, permitted himself a similar luxury. Amos allowed he would wait till he got to the river, when, as he pointed out, he would wash his clothes at the same time. Polly the baby was taken out for exercise, and as he crawled about in the sun, with nothing on but his valuable necklace, he looked like a blown-out football with a round head. A few minutes later he was discovered by his nurse proudly inspecting the flourished nippers of a black scorpion, whose body was clasped in a chubby hand and whose venomous tail was frantically feeling for something to stab.

"Call that a baby?" said Amos, who was nurse for the time.

"By jimminy!" yelled Dave, slicing the tail off with his knife. "Why didn't you do something, you—you lob-sided, razor-backed porkipine?"

"Tell me, you ole pumpkin-head, if you ever seen a real flesh-and-live baby ketch hole of a scorpion 'thout being stung! 'Coourse not. Well!"

Dave rocked the infant in his arms.

"Most like," continued Si, "he were arsting that insect some question. There'll be bad luck from your interfering that way."

"We have left bad luck behind," said Mark, cheerily, "with your uncle and Rooi Stoffel and the

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drought. I think we will have a thanksgiving supper to-night."

"So?" said Dave, inquiringly, for he loved a square meal.

"Ja; let me see. There's a pot of jam for a 'stick-jaw' pudding, which Si will make."

"Extra slice for the cook, of course."

"And grilled partridge *au jambon*."

"More jam?"

"Bacon, you owl; and a tin of haricot beans with Bombay duck."

"Beans, bacon, and duck! That's mooi, but I ain't seen duck."

"It's really fish, you know—dried fish biltong; and after that cheese and chocolate."

That sumptuous meal in due time was served up, and demolished with much satisfaction, though the Bombay duck set up an extravagant thirst. After supper they sang songs, under the stars, until a family of roving jackals joined in the chorus, when they curled up by the fire to enjoy the best luxury of all—a night's unbroken sleep. The next day was voted a day of rest for the oxen, and while they grazed with a half-hearted pretence of enjoying the sapless fare, the men patched their clothes and cobbled their boots. That is to say, Mark and Robey did, but Amos played on his concertina, with his brown eyes fixed now on one face, then on the other, to note the effect of his minstrelsy. As the dusk set in the fire was built up, the work was put away, and Amos talked of the "animiles" and their talents, of Kaffir stories and legends.

"About that yarn of the porkipine, Si?"

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“And the wild honde?”

“Ja.”

“Well, what began it were this. The ole man crocodile were lying on a mud-bank asleep with his mouth open, as if it were on hinges, with the inside all white, and the tick-birds cleaning his teeth for him. He woke up hungry, yearing a wild dog yowl down the river. So he slipped like a shadder, and went paddling off under water down to where the sound come from, when he showed his eyes above, and there was a dog, sure enuff, sitting on his tail with his nose to the sky. There was other crocs comin’ up from all sides, but the ole chap let out that this was his dog. He just sunk down, and crep’ up to where the bank shelved, and peeps out from behind a tangle of reeds. The dog he turned his head sideways, and took a squint at the river. ‘Looks all right,’ he ses; ‘looks quite smooth; no ripples about, as I can see. I’ll just go back for my family,’ he ses, ‘and we’ll cross over together.’ The ole crocodile he sorter krinkles about the jaws when he see the dog go off for his family, but he waited and he waited till the birds went to sleep, but the dog ain’t come back. ‘Stead of the dog comin’ up, along come the porkipine rattling his quills and grunting, with the water dripping off him.

“‘Holloa, pincushion, where did you cross?’ ses the crocodile, for he knew the porkipine lived over on the other side.

“‘Up yonder by the dead tree, baas.’

“‘Jimminy!’ ses the crocodile, snapping his jaws; ‘that’s my water.’

“‘That’s so, baas,’ ses the porkipine; ‘but when I yeard that dog howl, I knew you’d sail away.’

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“ ‘ And where is the dog ? ’

“ ‘ Oh, he crossed at the same place, ’ and the porkipine he sniggered. ‘ He just set up that howl to draw you off; and when you absquatulated, he just took to the water. ’ And he sniggered again.

“ The ole crocidile had to eat mud-fish for his supper, but the news went up and down the river how he had been done, and the supper turned sour. Nex’ day he tole how he’d caught a buffel by the nose and dragged him into deep water, but the other crocidiles just yawned. He crawled out and turned over to show where he’d been wounded in the great fight with a lion, but it didn’t wash. They tole him there was a blind puppy in a ant-bear’s hole, and what made him savager was that the porkipine was always sniggering around on the bank, and that the same dog took to howling whenever he went to sleep. So he began to make a plan. He lay half in and half out the water a day and night making a plan. Then he woke up and killed a water-buck. Half of this he eat, and the other half he dragged up to the place where the dog used to howl. By’mby up come the dog, and he looked at the buck and he looked at the ole croc, who were away off in the mud.

“ ‘ It’s yours, ’ ses the crocidile. ‘ A little present for the little ones. ’

“ The dog sniffed around, suspicious-like, but the buck were all right. There was nothing wrong with the buck.

“ ‘ Danke, baas, ’ he ses.

“ ‘ It’s all right, ’ ses the crocidile. ‘ I’ve been thinking it over. I dare say you saw me thinking. Well, what I thought was this : you and me are hunters, and one hunter should not kill another. There is peace between us. ’

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“The dog sorter backed off.

“‘You can swim across when you like, and whenever I have anything to spare you are welcome.’

“The dog went off with the buck, and nex’ day it was the same. There was the hind quarter of a spring-buck.

“‘It’s yours,’ ses the crocodile, opening one eye.

“‘It’s real good of you, baas,’ ses the dog, ‘and I won’t howl any more.’

“‘Howl!’ ses the ole croc, s’prised like. ‘It’s music. Why, I never yeard sich singing—never. It’s beautiful, that what it is. Reminds me of the time when I were young and tender;’ and he began to cry.

“The wild dog he looked uncomfortable. ‘You sing,’ ses the croc, ‘sing ’s much as you like, and bring your family, my friend. Let them sing too. I enjoy it.’

“Well, the wild dog he took some of that spring-buck into his inside, and carried what was left to his wife and kinders. Nex’ day he went sof’-footed back, not being certain in his mind about this new discovery of the crocodile; but, sure enuff, there were the hind quarters of a spring-buck up on the bank, and there were the croc down on the mud. The dog he ’membered about the ‘singing,’ and fetched a howl kinder gently, ’s if he wern’t quite sure.

“‘Beautiful,’ says the crocodile, turning up his eyes. ‘I’ve left a small fragment for you, my friend; and don’t forget your family next time.’

“The dog he ate the meat, and took the bones home to his wife. Nex’ day he come along with his family, and the whole of ’em was howling like fits as they drew near the water.

“‘My quills and ears,’ ses the porkipine, ‘what’s this harlaboerla?’

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“‘It’s singing,’ says the dog, looking out the corner of his eyes.

“‘Singing!’ ses the porkipine.

“‘Yes, we’re singers from singing-town for the ole man in the river, and he keeps us in meat;’ and the dog he told about the crocidile, and what came of his thinking so much.

“‘Look here,’ ses the porkipine, very solemn, ‘you got to watch yourself in this game, or one day you’ll wake up in ole man crocidile’s inside room. You hear?’

“‘My dear,’ ses Mrs. Dog, licking her chops, ‘don’t stand talking with that eater of roots.’

“Well, the family went on, and the porkipine he crep’ into the reeds to see what sort o’ game it was. Sure ’nuff, there were a bit of meat, taken out of the pantry under the water with a smell that were very grateful to the dogs. They just went for it, but by’mby one of the little round yellow pups frisked off down the bank to where that log o’ wood lay still an’ peaceful, with one end gapin’ open. The pup he frisked here and he frisked there, and nex’ thing there were no pup.

“‘Hi!’ ses the porkipine—‘hi there! one o’ your little ’uns is gone.’

“The mother dog she cast her eye around and went on eating, ’cos why? ’cos she can’t count.

“‘The one with the white nose,’ yelled the porkipine. ‘I seen him walk into the crocidile’s throat.’

“‘Oh! the wickedness,’ ses the ole scaly, looking very wicked. ‘The black envy of these little root-grubbers—these low grass-eaters. Here am I, out of the fulness of my heart——’

“‘Stummick,’ grunts the porkipine.

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“ ‘Providing delicious food for people I respect, and this prickly toad—this thing that is neither pig nor bird, this mean, grunting cactus plant—tries to sow suspicion. The pretty little puppy—so like his dear mother—so handsome !’

“ The mother dog looked up and snapped at the porkipine to be off.

“ ‘I seed him do it,’ ses the porkipine.

“ ‘My dear,’ ses the old croc, ‘he’s quite soft underneath. Turn him over, and he will make good eating.’

“ The porkipine, when he yeard this, he scrambled off, for he was very nervous about his underneath ; but two days later he year a awful row by the river, and went over to see. There was the dog, and his wife, and only one pup, sitting on their tails and yeouling to bring the sky down. They howled and howled, and by’mby came the ole crocidile out of the water.

“ ‘Thank you, my friends,’ he ses—and then he fetched a sigh. ‘I’m gettin’ ole and feeble,’ he ses—‘ole and feeble ; and a buck pulled away. Think of that—pulled away, when I had my grip on him ; and there is no meat.’

“ ‘It does not matter,’ says the dog, who was very round about the stummick.

“ ‘But the shame,’ ses the croc—‘the shame of it ; and I cannot forget the insult from that porkipine. It burns,’ he ses, and begins to weep. ‘I think,’ he ses, ‘if that porkipine was dead and buried, I would get back my strength.’

“ ‘You must kill the porkipine,’ ses Mrs. Dog with a snap.

“ ‘But he ain’t done me no harm.’

“ ‘No harm ! and he’s taking the food from out of the mouths of your wife and children.’

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“The dog he moved off.

“‘Catch him under the stummick, my friend,’ ses ole scaly, softly.

“Well, the porkipine were in such a stew that he was all of a tremble, and the dog yeard his quills rattle and found him.

“‘We’re ole friends,’ ses the porkipine, hugging the ground.

“‘What you squatting down so tight for?’ ses the dog.

“‘Well,’ he ses, ‘I don’t want to go where your puppies went.’

“‘Where’s that?’

“‘Down the crocidile’s throat. You want to eat me, and the crocidile will eat you, same as he has eaten your kinders, and same as he is going to eat your wife. Jus’ look!’

“The dog he looked through the reeds, and he sees the last pup tumbling about near the crocidile. He were about to sing out, when his wife went down, stepping light, with her hair all standing on end.

“‘Bless his little heart!’ ses the crocidile. ‘His mother’s little pet!’

“With that she went near, and ‘wish-wish’ came the long tail, and nex’ minit Mrs. Dog were a goner.

“‘What I tell you?’ ses the porkipine. ‘He’s eaten your family, and he’ll eat you.’

“The dog’s hair riz up.

“‘Don’t break down,’ ses the porkipine. ‘Your family are all together now. They’re in pieces,’ he ses, ‘and in peace.’

“The dog sat down again and scratched his ears with

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his behind leg. Then the tears trickled off his nose, and he licked them with his tongue.

“ ‘Don’t, my friend!’ ses the porkipine. ‘Ole grey tail has a fat daughter, and if you married into the family you’d have the run of the best hunting-ground.’

“ ‘And to think,’ ses the dog, ‘that I were going to eat you for the sake of that old——’

“ ‘Graveyard,’ ses the porkipine.

“ ‘We must get even with him, Quills.’

“ ‘We must.’

“ ‘We’ll teach him how to eat whole families up. But how? Tell me how?’

“ ‘He’s soft underneath,’ ses the porkipine, in a whisper. ‘And he opens his mouth when he sleeps.’

“ ‘It’s a trap,’ ses the dog, showing his teeth. ‘That’s what his mouth is.’

“ The porkipine he stretched his skin, he heaved and he grunted, and then he shook himself, and out fell a quiver of quills, like ’s if a brooding hen were dropping feathers. He picked out eight straight strong quills with points like the point of a dry thorn, and he ses to the dog, ‘You go out and talk to that graveyard out there, but don’t let on you know anything;’ and he picked up the eight quills in his mouth by the middle and toddled off. The dog he stepped out.

“ ‘Mornin’, baas,’ he ses. ‘Seen my wife and kinders?’

“ ‘Ah!’ ses the crocodile, with a smile. ‘I have a message for you, dear friend. News come that a dead elephant lies beyond the river, and your wife left word for you to follow her. She crossed over with the little ones.’

“ ‘So? Well, I ain’t crossing just now, baas. Fac’ is, I

expec' to catch that low sand-looper that's been annoying you by'mby when the sun goes under, and if you don't mind, I'll pass the time here.'

" 'As you please ; but a dead elephant is better 'n a live thorn-bush.'

" 'It's a matter of principle, baas,' ses the dog.

" So the croc he let it go at that, and went off to sleep, opening his jaws so that the dog could see into his throat. The sight made him think of his family, and he grew savager and savager. Now and again the crocodile would take a squint through his glass-green eyes, but the sun being hot, and him being full of dog, he dropped off sound. In the afternoon up come the porkipine with something in his mouth.

" 'There,' he ses, ' what you think of that ?'

" ' Nothing,' ses the wild dog.

" ' So ?' The porkipine he fetched up a long reed and split open one end. ' I'm thinkin',' he ses, ' that will cook his goose.'

" ' What is it ?' ses the dog.

" ' Them eight quills—see ? There's four pointing one way and four the other, and they're bound together tight as tight. First I stuck 'em with cactus juice, then I got two of them big spiders to wrap 'em round, and last the bees in the ole ant-hill covered 'em with wax. And then I run 'em through a bit of tough reed.'

" ' And what yer going to do with that ?'

" ' This yer ;' and the porkipine fitted the split reed round the middle of the bound quills. ' Now you see ?'

" ' Blamed if I do,' ses the dog.

" ' Well, you just take up this end of the reed in your mouth, and you carry it down there. Then you get them

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quills end on between the jaws, and the trick's done. The trick's done,' he ses; 'but you ain't got the pluck.'

"The wild dog he considered the plan for a spell. Then he grabbed hold of the reed and went down with his hair all riz up. It were a long job to get the quill dagger inside the jaws; but, at last, when he was all of a sweat, the thing were done.

"'Hi!' ses the porkipine—'hi! Here's a man coming with a gun,' and the crocodile shut his jaws. Well, he didn't shut 'em, but he went fur enuff to run the end of the quills into his tongue on one side, and the roof of his mouth on the other. The pain weren't great, an' he jus' took a look round for the man.

"'Ain't no man, baas,' ses the dog with a grin.

"'What's this in my mouth, friend?' ses the crocodile, gruff-like.

"'Just a reed, baas. Only a reed. Jus' you shut your jaws, and you'll surely break it up.'

"Well, the crocodile he tried to break the reed, and instead he jammed his tongue fast into the jaw. This time he bellowed like a bull, made the mud fly with his tail, while the porkipine rolled on the ground laughing, and the dog skipped around with a dry grin.

"'Shut your jaws, baas,' he ses; 'shut 'em tighter.'

"The crocodile he started for the river, but he were quicker out, for the water ran into his stummick, so 's he'd 'a been drowned. Out he come again, and begun to play up soft.

"It weren't no use, for the wild dog he let out that he knew where his family had gone. Then the crocodile roared to the other crocs in the water, but they let him be, and in the end the ants ate him up."

"The ants ate him?" said Dave.

"Ja; they ate the inside of him out."

"He was a slim kerel—the porkipine," said Dave.

"Ja," said Amos, reaching for his concertina.

But the first note went off in a wail; for once again that melancholy howl that had always been to them a sound of warning quivered through the night, rose and fell, and died away, leaving a profound silence. Some one cast a handful of withered stuff on the embers. It flamed up, throwing a red light on the anxious listening faces, then flickered down to ash. Amos put his concertina down slowly, and stepped out from the ring of light into the outer darkness. His figure could be dimly discerned for a few moments while he paused listening; then it was lost in the gloom. Robey moved away from the fire; and Mark heard him open the breech of his rifle; so he, too, reached for his gun.

CHAPTER XXII

A TERRIBLE AWAKENING

"He is long away," said Mark, breaking the silence at last.

"Ja; it is in my bones that something is wrong—
altetal (altogether) wrong."

"I would go after him."

"Leave him. It is his work."

"Send Sixpence after him."

Sixpence sat crouching by the fire with his head turned.

"I hear," he said; "the oxen are moving."

They heard the snort of an ox, and the heavy steps, then saw the gleam of the spreading horns. Amos reappeared and fastened two oxen to the fore wheel.

"The rest are gone," he said.

"Which way?" shouted Dave. "Gone! and I thought they would rest for the night! Which way?"

"They have gone!" said Amos with a choke.

"It is nothing. Often they have trekked before, following the 'voorlooper;' but I have found them—always I have found them."

"Not now, Dave. The Boers have taken them."

"Taken my oxen!"

"Ja. They left these two. Maybe they did not see them. The others they are driving on horseback."

"My oxen!" said Dave in a whisper; then quietly, "Which way?"

"Up the valley."

"Where are you going?" said Mark, placing his hand on Robey's arm.

"After those devils!" roared Dave. "Let me loose!"

"Nonsense!" said Mark. "You will stay here."

"Loose me!" said Dave, jerking his arm.

"Let him go," said Amos. "What does it matter? We are done, and if Dave likes to end up that way, let him."

"I will kill some of them first! My oxen! Verdom! Let go, or I strike!"

"Strike me because the Boers have stolen your oxen! You are not the sort of man to do that, Dave. Sit down, man, and let us talk. This is as much our loss as yours."

"Talk! What is there to talk about?"

"Everything," said Mark, manfully. "We agreed to stand by each other, and it would be a shameful thing to split up when there is most need to act together. We are more to you than your oxen, aren't we?"

"Say away," gruffly.

"First let us understand what is the danger that threatens us. Were our oxen taken by Boers? and if so, were they the same band we met before?"

"Who else?" said Amos.

"Suppose they are, then. The next question is whether they will attack us."

"They have got us like sheep in a kraal. We are here to take whenever they like."

"Then the first thing is to prepare for an attack."

"What good? They would starve us out."

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"Then do you mean to give yourselves up without a fight?"

"No."

"All right, then. The longer we can hold out, if we are attacked, the better our chance of escape. But we must put the best face on it, understand. There is no place for despair in our plans."

"But with only two oxen left?"

"Never fear," said Mark. "Let us pull together, and we'll find a way out. Now, then, all hands to work, and we'll have a laager built by the morning."

He hurled himself at the work with an energy that infected the others, and by the morning they had built up a barrier of stones. At sunrise Mark and Amos were on the ridge, and, as the light strengthened, they saw a wagon trekking towards them from the south, with a party of horsemen ahead, and another party with the stolen oxen nearer. They returned to the laager with the news, and then went to work once more at the wall, carrying stones from the hillside till their arms ached.

"Enough," said Dave. "Come, eat, and then sleep. They won't be here for some hours."

"I couldn't sleep," said Mark, who was consumed with a fierce energy.

"Drink this coffee," said Dave, quietly, "and lie down there—so. Heavy eyes are no good for straight shooting. Play that durned bellows, Si—something sad, that'll make us glad to sleep."

Amos did not resent the scoff. He took up his "wind-box," and played such a melancholy refrain as brought a wistful look into his clear brown eyes, and a quiver to his flexible lips. It was a queer prelude to a battle, Mark

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thought, as his brain worked feverishly; but presently his deep breathing mingled with that of Robey's. Amos sat with his concertina idle in his hand, staring at the ground; then he turned his head and saw Sixpence watching him.

"How is it," he said softly, in Kaffir, "you do not sleep?"

Sixpence made no answer, but watched his old playmate and master intently, as a dog watches the hunter.

"You have seen a tiger caught in a trap?"

"He is helpless in there—a mark for children."

"We are fast held."

"Eweh."

"Of what use are the dead to the dead? If we stay we die and they die."

Sixpence rose, and softly entered the wagon. After a time he reappeared outside the wall with two haversacks well filled with food. Amos rose, picked up his rifle, and, without looking at his comrades, stepped over the wall. The two went off swiftly up the hill, and as they went, the "leader," looking over the wall, followed them with frightened eyes. Then he, too, hastily gathered food, picked up Mark's many-bladed knife, and a striped blanket, and slipped away, noticed only by the mild-eyed oxen, who stood patiently whisking their tails, and now and again sniffing at their sleeping master. The shadow crept under the wagon, and began to appear on the other side, when Dave woke up with a yawn.

"By Jove!" said Mark, "I did sleep after all."

"It's a good sign. I like a man who can sleep before a fight."

"I say, where's Amos?"

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Dave looked under the wagon, then shaded his eyes and stared up the hill, then he looked into the wagon.

"And Sixpence?" said Mark, "and the 'leader'? They have been keeping guard while we slept. It's a shame."

"Shame! Ja! shame it is." And Dave's large blue eyes blazed.

"All right, old man, you rest here an' sleep. Then we can take their places."

Dave turned away, and leant on one of the oxen.

"Dave, what is the matter?"

"Matter enough, lad," he said, keeping his face away for the shame that burnt in it. "They've run."

"Bolted! Never! They are up the hill or scouting."

"Would they take blankets and filled haversacks? And him a Colonial, too! To sneak away; and it was for him we came!" Dave turned round, and Mark read the bitter truth in the honest face aflame with burning anger.

"You must be mistaken," muttered Mark.

"I tell you he's gone like a jackal, he is," said Dave, with a fierce look. "Slunk away without a word; and I might have known the thought was in his heart, because of the few words he spoke after the oxen went. I'm sorry I didn't go last night."

Mark winced, then straightened up. "If you'd like to go, Dave, I will say nothing."

The blood rushed into the big man's face. "Take care, youngster."

"Do," continued Mark, "as you would if I were not here. Don't let my presence influence you in the least."

Dave gave a sigh of relief. "Shake hands, and 'so long!'"

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"So long!" said Mark, steadily.

Dave crunched Mark's fingers in a grasp of iron, then lit his pipe and sat down.

"Well," he said presently. "Ain't you going?"

"Me! no. I thought you were going."

"You did: honest?"

"I wished you to go, if you thought it best."

"My lad," said Dave, simply. "Men like you and me don't do those things."

Mark said no more, but in his heart he was proud and glad. It was a fine thing for him to be true; it was a finer thing to find a man true to him.

Dave looked over the wall, then busied himself with the kettle, breaking, for the first time, into song—

"All de wareld, all de wareld, all de wareld is my home.
With my kettle, and my coffee, and my twaak-sack all alone.
With my heart free, with my foot sore, for I loop far,
Yes, I loop from land to sea."

Mark made a prolonged survey of the hills with his glasses, and reported that some men were off-saddling about a mile up the valley, and that the tent of the wagon was to be seen beyond.

"You can hear the wheels," said Dave.

"'With my osse-wa' I will trek far, I will trek into the veld,
With my good roer, and my klein broer, and my felskoens of the fel'."

Auch, Mark, it is in my heart to let loose those two good oxen. They will surely die in the little kraal."

"I don't know," said Mark, thoughtfully. "I was thinking that if we came out all right we could make a little cart with the front wheels."

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Dave strangled a groan, and pretended that the idea was good.

"A little cart; ja. What's that noise?"

"Sounds like Polly," said Mark.

"My ghoisters! but I did not see him in the wagon."

There was no doubt about it, however, and Mark found the little black neck-deep in a bag suspended from a bent rafter, and crying lustily. He carried him into the laager, bag and all; and Dave was feeding the hungry little stranger when the first bullet sang overhead.

"Ah!" said Dave. "It is too late to turn the oxen out."

"If we could get the beggars to lie down——"

"Daarom goot!" said Dave, setting Polly under the wagon. "I have thrown many an ox in my time. A good plan that."

With a superb indifference to the bullets that came searching around as his head rose above the wall, Dave tied the feet of the oxen, and flung them, where they remained sprawling over half the little enclosed square.

"I like to hear that klein Bushman," said Dave, wiping away the blood that trickled from a cut on his forehead from a fragment of lead.

"I wish you would take care," said Mark. "Don't you know that they are firing?"

Dave bound a red handkerchief round his head, while Mark fired at a rock.

"Let them shoot, kerel. It is only when they come on the ridge opposite that we need look out—and, by gum, they'll have to look out, too. There is nothing scares a Boer so much as the man who holds his fire. We can wait. You ain't got the jumps?"

"I think not," said Mark, laughing.

"Hold your gun out—so. Don't shake a ha'p'orth! Wrist firm; that's what I like. We'll just wait."

So they waited, Dave smoking quietly with his eyes fixed on the ridge above him, and Mark taking an occasional peep through a loop-hole between the steel shields on the other side. They could hear voices of men calling to each other, and Mark suggested the possibility of a rush which would take them at a disadvantage; for they could not see up the valley.

"They won't rush," said Dave, confidently. "'Tain't worth their while taking any risks when they know we can't move off.

'I will outspan by the groot pan; I will outspan by the grass;
When the sun's hot, from the big pot; I will eat the lekker koss;
In the night time, when the stars shine, when the wind blows off
the sea,
I will opstan, I will inspan, I will trek with heart so free.
All de wareld, all de wareld, all de wareld is my home.'

Dave was playing a part. He felt it his duty to appear at ease for Mark's sake. But Clinton was in need of no stiffening. The feeling of rawness and inexperience, which had made him before somewhat diffident, had worn off, and his native courage could be seen in his clear eyes and resolute face. He did not, however, possess the patience of the Colonial, and as the day wore on he longed for action; but the Boers were in no hurry. The wagon, as he could see, had outspanned up the valley, the horses and oxen were peacefully grazing, and only at long intervals would a man send a bullet their way.

"Oor jij!"

As they sat waiting grimly, with the sun beating down

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upon them, a man called out from the side of the hill shut from view by the side of the wagon.

"I hear," replied Dave.

"Listen. You have come to the end of your trek. Is it not so?"

"And toe," said Dave.

"Well, we don't want you, but we want your wagon and the goods. You can fill your sacks, and go as the others did."

"What others?"

"We know. There are but two of you there. The others went while you slept. What can two do? Nix. You will soon be without water. You can do nothing. We will give you till to-morrow. Think well and go. That is all."

Dave shrugged his shoulders and looked at Mark.

"Do you think they have caught Amos, or——"

"That Amos went to them. No; he would not do that. I think not; but, as you see, they have caught some one."

"Well?"

"Ja," said Dave.

"As he says, we shall be without water very soon."

"For that matter," said Dave, "I do not want to die of thirst. Magtig no. A bullet is better."

"If we went they would probably run us down."

"True. And if they did not it would be the same."

Mark lapsed into silence.

"There is one thing," said Dave. "We must let these oxen loose. They must not suffer too," and he began unfastening the rheims, while Mark stood up to make a passage in the wall for the poor animals to pass through.

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"My heart is sore to lose them," said Dave; "and yet, if they stay, a bullet will surely find them."

"They had better go."

The oxen lurched to their feet, and shook their heads. Mark looked at them, and suddenly a great idea struck him. He flushed, then turned white, looking at Dave with burning eyes.

"What is it, Clinton?"

"Dave, our luck is with us."

Robey turned slowly and looked at the black baby lying on its back.

"The oxen," said Mark, thickly. "They will carry our kit. We will use them as pack-oxen."

Dave shouted. "Pack osse! You've got it," and he gripped Mark's hand. "Pack oxen, and me not to think of it. Good!" The big man rubbed his hands, and beamed with joy.

"There is the spare sail," said Mark, thinking rapidly. "We will make from it two belly-bands, and then sew on bags, one on each side. There are big needles and packing-thread in the wagon."

Dave pointed out the roll of canvas, pulled it out, passed a rheim round the body of an ox, took the measure, and began cutting off a breadth while Mark entered the wagon for the thread and needles.

Bags were made by cutting off squares from the canvas and stitching them on three sides to the belly-bands, with a yoke-skei down each corner of the bag to keep the mouth open. In a couple of hours they had finished tailoring, and the band was carried round the body of one ox and firmly drawn together with strong hide thongs. The other band was fixed, and these were ready to receive

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supplies—four capacious pockets, each capable of carrying a week's rations. Mark then made up the food into parcels, while Dave packed, and by sun-down the work was done, and a couple of blankets with a covering waterproof sheet neatly bound with the spare ox-rheims over each load.

"It is a good job," said Dave with satisfaction.

"So far so good, Dave; but we have still to get away. Suppose some one has been spying on us all the time?" and Mark looked anxiously up at the ridge. "We should have waited till dusk before placing the pack on. By Jove!"

"Eh?"

"See the three rocks near the top—those with the bush growing out of them."

Dave picked up his rifle.

"Look just above the bush. It seems to me like a man lying down. If so, well, our plan will come to nothing. We should have waited."

Dave brought his rifle up.

"No; don't shoot. He will have signalled already, or sent a message back."

"Then you will give up?" asked Dave, sullenly.

"Not at all. They will lay their plans to catch us somewhere down the valley, won't they?"

"That they will do, if they have seen us."

"Well, instead of passing down the valley, we will go up the valley, where they don't expect us."

Dave looked gravely at his young comrade, then put his rifle down, and set about making a fire with yokes for their last meal.

"You say nothing."

“There is nix to say, kerel.”

An hour after sun-down they set to work making a passage through the wall, moving each stone gently. They waited in silence for a long spell, then moved out, and on Dave's suggestion moved about fifty yards down the valley. Then they turned, stopped a minute at the laager, which Mark entered, and then, hugging the side of the hill, went straight toward the enemy's camp. Dave leading one ox and carrying the baby slung over his back, Kaffir fashion, went first. The oxen padded out, loomed out in the dark huge and monstrous shapes, but as they were fortunately the tamest of the whole span, they followed gently enough. When they had covered about a hundred yards there came a dull report in their rear, followed by a crashing sound, and later, as the report died away, by the shouts of men. Mark had fired the fuse attached to the dynamite charge taken from the dead Boers, and the wagon was shattered to pieces. Men called to each other across the valley, and from the enemy's wagon others came running down.

“Stand still!” whispered Dave, and they halted. The sound of steps rapidly approached, several men passed within a few yards of them, and then Dave pressed forward quickly to get by the wagon before the men returned. As they went they looked round repeatedly, and presently saw flames break out, and the outlines of men moving about, trying, no doubt, to recover some of the precious loot. Then a deep voice bellowed out in Dutch—

“Shoot the verdomde skepsels. Search for them—search! Which way did they go?”

“They went down.”

“Then find them.”



M 964

"THERE CAME A DULL REPORT IN THEIR REAR"



A Terrible Awakening 335

"But they have gone."

"Search, you dogs, or it will be worse for you!"

"Hurry!" muttered Dave, as Stoffel raved like a madman.

"Quicker!" said Mark, pressing from behind. They neared the enemy's camp, saw the gleam of the fire, and the outline of a figure standing.

"He will hear us," hissed Dave, halting.

"We can't stay here, man."

"Hold this." Dave gave the rein to Mark and ran forward. It was a desperate plan he had formed, but it was the safest, provided there was only one man, and he could master him.

He panted heavily as he ran. "Kerel," he gasped.

"What happens!" said the man by the fire, coming forward.

Dave grunted, and launched his mighty fist in the man's face. He paused a second to glare at the wagon in the expectation of discovery, but there was no one else there; and Mark coming up, he bound a handkerchief round the man's mouth, though it seemed an unnecessary precaution.

"Loop!" said Dave. "Loop!"

They hurried on, but at best it was only at a quick walk, for the oxen could not trot even; but at last they had passed the wagon, then Dave turned to the left, passed up a depression in the ridge, and began the descent on the far side. When they reached the bottom they could see the Dutchmen on the ridge above, and the oxen stopped to pluck at the herbage. They tugged and tugged, but the stubborn brutes merely shook their heads and went on cropping. They had simply to wait, and

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never did an hour pass so slowly as did that hour when they stood with the Boers hunting the hill for them, and the prospect of liberty and life before them. At last the oxen slackened off, and consented to be led leisurely for a short distance, when they jibbed again. Dave fastened the rheims together and twisted their tails. It was a thing he had not done before, even in a bad "stick-fast," and the two astonished "achter osse," the pets of the span, went off at a lumbering trot.

CHAPTER XXIII

TRICKED AND CAPTURED

Three days later they were encamped in a laagte on the banks of the Orange River, a little ledge of fertile ground about a mile long and a mile wide at its broadest, between the river-bank and the enclosing hills, that had been eaten out by floods long since. There were patches of thick bush, interspersed with little glades of grass, and the camp was formed in the thickest cluster, with the oxen grazing near. They had reached this retreat over a bit of country that no wagon could cross, and they felt reasonably safe. They resolved to cache the bulk of their supplies here, and to make it the head-quarters of a roaming mission, for they had not given up all hope of finding the diamonds. They came to the conclusion that their new camp was above the Falls, and they resolved to explore downstream first of all, to locate the position of the Falls. What bothered them was the baby, whose behaviour on the night of their escape had won Dave's respect. Not a cry had escaped from him, and ever since he had been a pattern of good humour.

"He's that knowing," said Dave, who was washing his shirt amid a pile of huge black rocks, while Mark was heroically engaged with a blanket, "I believe he could take care of himself if we left him behind."

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"The little beggar can't even walk."

"Jimminy! that necklace of his! If Stoffel had got a hold of it, or Van Snaar! I 'spose we must carry him along?"

"There's nothing else to do; but it will be rough on the little chap."

"Darned rough. Seems to me he's cutting a tooth. I gave him my finger to suck, and I believe—mind I ain't so for sure, but I believe I felt a tooth. Darn his little eyes! It's my belief, Clinton, that he understands everything;" and Dave dropped his voice.

"He certainly knows when it's meal-time."

"Last night I saw him walking about."

Mark whistled, and banged the blanket on the rocks.

"Saw him walking about," said Dave, solemnly. "And a minute later I heard a tiger growl. That's so. The oxen snorted and came close up to the fire, and that baby just marched out into the dark and talked to the tiger."

Mark looked seriously at Dave. "What you need, Dave, is a dose of quinine."

"But," said Dave, "the tiger went away. Went off quiet as a lamb."

"And what did Polly do then?"

"I'll tell you. As true as I sit here, when I looked under the blanket, there he were curled up asleep."

Mark laughed. "He had been asleep all the time, you duffer. He's always sleeping. I bet he's asleep now;" and he peeped over a rock down on a little strip of clean sand. Then he dropped his blanket and jumped over. "Dave, he's gone!"

Dave bounded up and stared with Mark at the sand, which was dented slightly where the baby had sat.

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"What I tell you?" he muttered. "He's maybe walked back to the camp."

"Nonsense! How could he?"

"Well, where is he? Tell me where he is;" and Dave peered about everywhere.

"What's this?" said Mark, picking up something. "The diamond, by Jove!" and he held the glittering gem in the palm of his hand.

"He's gone, then," said Dave, taking off his hat. "Left that behind for us, and clean gone. I knew all along he weren't a baby. No baby had got the sense he had. What do you see now?"

Mark was looking intently at a smooth rock from which he had picked the diamond.

"Did the baby draw that?"

"Which?" Dave peeped over Mark's shoulder. "Bushman sign, by gum! He done it—of course, he done it; and it's a sign for us."

"Never mind who drew it. What does it mean? That wavy line should be the river. It was the same mark on the little plan; and that thing there is a baboon."

"And the bow means the rainbow below the Falls, same as on the plan."

"Yes. And what are these signs—some on one side the river and some on the other?"

"Let's see." Dave studied the marks, which were drawn apparently with a bit of red clay. "Those are men, standing in a row—seven of them—and they are all pointing their arms at the river. Those marks on the other side must be men too."

"They're not pointing!" shouted Mark, taking another look—"they're shooting! Those are guns!"

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"Ghoisters," said Dave.

"By Jove!" and Mark stared at Dave, the same thought in their minds.

"Ja; that's it. Those two on the other side are Amos and the Kaffir."

"Then Amos did not go over to the enemy?"

"Never thought so;" and the two looked at each other, then at the rock, and then around for signs of the person who had made the sign.

"Better go back to camp;" and back to camp they went at a run; but there was no sign of the baby there.

"He's taken my blanket," said Dave, proudly. "He always liked the smell of that blanket."

"And the small-pot," said Mark, drily, "not to speak of several packages. For a baby, Dave, he has extraordinary carrying powers."

"Well, he ain't taken the oxen, thank goodness."

"Of course, he might have gone off with one under each arm; and in case he comes back with his family, I am going to find a hiding-place for our stores."

"We'll have two hidings: you find one, and I'll find the other, so in case the little cuss is watching, he can only foller one. Same time, we'll leave something here for him to eat, case he runs short."

The selection of a hiding-place took some time, but finally Dave hit upon an abandoned ant-bear hole, the mouth of which was overgrown with brambles; and Mark decided upon a cavity under a shelving rock on the hill-side above the flood-mark. The goods were made up in two separate parcels, bound in canvas, covered with strips of bark, and then stowed away.

"That's done," said Mark, as they met again at the

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camp. "If anything happens to me, you will find my package under a flat rock at the other end."

"Eh?"

"Right in under the rock."

"If anything were to happen to you," said Dave, slowly; then his face went suddenly grey. "Oh, my bootie, my bootie!" he cried brokenly.

Mark placed his hand on the man's shoulder. "Who was your bootie?" he asked gravely.

"My broer—my brother;" and Dave turned a stricken face to Mark. "He had that hollow in his chin, like you. Maybe to-day he would be straight like you, and with the same look, but"—simply—"I killed him."

"Dave!"

"It was an accident. Ja; we were beating a kloof for buck, and, see, he left his place. I saw a bush move, then brown hair—just a patch—and fired. He was there lying looking up, with his eyes open wide. 'Don't cry, Dave,' he said. 'It was my fault—all my fault; but you can shoot straight. So long,' he said. Oh ay, he held me by the hand, and he looked me in the eyes. 'Dave,' he said—for I could not speak—'Dave,' he said, 'you must not. It was not your fault.' He held my hand, and his blood ran, ran—ran to where I knelt. 'Dave,' he said, 'promise.' I sat there, Clinton, through the night, and his hand was cold in mine before the night began. But each time I felt for my gun there came a whisper to me. Clinton, it was hard, and in the night-time. I wonder why God sent that bullet straight."

"I am awfully sorry, Dave," whispered Mark.

"Ja. He had a chin like you, and it all came up when you said something might happen. There is a thought in

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my mind; it has been there since you stood up to that man at Port Elizabeth—that maybe my brother brought you to me, so I could help you in a little way.”

“I am glad, very glad to have you as a friend, Dave.”

“Danke,” said Dave. “To no one have I said this thing. And you will think no worse of me?”

“How could I? It was an accident.”

“Ja. He said so, and he knew. But you know why I take no pride in my shooting.” Dave sighed heavily. “Ach! Well, let us go; and see you, Clinton, that you take no hurt.”

They went down to the river, studied once more the Bushman painting, hunted among the rocks for the missing baby, then stripped and swam across the yellow river from boulder to boulder. The two oxen watched them cross, and then, as they stood on the farther shore, raised a protesting bellow. Dave waved his hand. They climbed up the bank, and turned their faces west, and they stepped briskly downstream, with the river on their left and a desolate region on the right stretching into the Kalihari and the wastes of Damaraland. They went on in silence for several miles, brooding each over his own thoughts, which had set into a deep current by the relation of the sad tragedy of the hunt, and then the sight of a rainbow-tinted cloud ahead brought them back to the present. The cloud marked the end of their journey. It was somewhere beneath that rainbow that the diamonds were, and with that glistening gem in their possession they had no doubt that diamonds were there.

“There’s the rainbow!” cried Mark. And they stood on a little hill watching the soft cloud melt away into the blue, and renew itself from the floating spray, and

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melt again, and form anew with a continual movement that was pleasant to watch.

"Ja; and there's the baviaan," said Dave, pointing to the top of a krantz to the right, where, clearly outlined, sat a baboon with a pickaninny at its side.

"Baugh! baugh! baugh-um!" barked the baboon at them, and as the hoarse cry rolled away there came an answer from below, "Baugh! baugh! baugh-um!"

"What on earth can the baboon have to do with the diamonds?"

"It is daarom strange," said Dave; "yet the baviaan was on the Bushman's picture on the rock."

"I wonder if there was a hint to us to examine the place where we saw the first baboon."

"It seemed to me, Clinton, that the second cry we heard was by a man. Maybe it is Amos."

Mark put his hand to his mouth and gave a long "Coo-ee-ee!" An answer came and the baboon on the krantz barked. Mark looked up, and it seemed to him that the creature waved him to go back, but he smiled at the idea.

"Coo-ee!" right ahead.

"Come along!" said Mark; and "coo-ee!" he answered. They forced their way through a very awkward thicket and gained a second ridge which overlooked a little rock-strewn valley. Down the river was the rainbow coming and going on the rising mist, but there was no sign of Amos yet. "Coo-ee!" There was a dip beyond, and the sound seemed to come from there.

"Funny he does not show himself."

"My gum!" growled Dave, "I will show him something when I get hold of his scraggy neck."

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"Perhaps he is wounded," said Mark, and began quickly to advance.

"Baugh! baugh! baugh-um!" barked the baboon.

"Stop, Clinton," said Dave. "I don't like this."

"Coo-ee! coo-ee! Baugh!"

"It is Amos, sure enough," laughed Mark, and they pressed on quickly for a few yards, when they stopped dead, chilled by the cry they had so often heard, the mournful peal sounding very like the drone of a sea-shell when held to the ear, but greatly increased.

"It is the little brown man," whispered Dave. "Back! Out of this, quick!"

They turned, and the sun gleamed on the barrels of two rifles.

"Hands up!"

Dave laughed and dropped his rifle, but Mark threw his head back, and seemed to be gathering his muscles for a spring.

"Move, Englander, and you are dead!"

Dave's arm shot out under Mark's chin, and with his right hand he snatched the gun as the other staggered back.

"It was best," said Dave, meeting Mark's angry gaze.

The man behind the rock stepped forward with a laugh, with his finger on the trigger, and two others rose up from the right and left.

"It was a good plan," he said, "and you walked right in."

"Coo-ee! coo-ee!" came in a strangled laugh from behind them, and Mark went sick with disgust, for it seemed to him to be the voice of Amos.

Two other men came up, and one of them, the man

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Wicks, whose eyes were discoloured, struck Dave in the face.

Dave laughed again. "Halloa, Van Snaar," he said; "how gaad it? Daag, Oom Stoffel! Daag, kerels! Have jij twaak by you, Van Snaar?"

"Twaak," said Stoffel, eagerly. "Search them, Wicks! search them!"

"You are welcome," said Dave, throwing his bag down and emptying his pockets, "but you won't get fat on us."

"We will see," said Stoffel, picking up Dave's pouch and filling his pipe, while his deep-set eyes scanned the loot. "Is that all?"

"All," said Wicks.

"Come," said Stoffel, "there is a diamond on one of you. I will have it, so no tricks hoor jij."

"You had better ask this man for it," said Mark, coldly, as he indicated Wicks.

Stoffel turned his eyes on Wicks, then shifted them to Van Snaar.

"How is this, Van Snaar? He is your man. Pas op, I say, pas op!"

"I know nothing about this," said Van Snaar, shortly; "and there is no need for threats."

"But Wicks is your man, and I say what is in my mind."

"Very well. If Wicks has the diamond, take it, and keep it for yourself, Stoffel. I can say no more."

Stoffel looked at Wicks. "You know what will happen," he said softly, "if you keep my property."

Wicks held the diamond out, and Stoffel snatched it. The others crowded round.

"What is it worth, Van Snaar?"

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Van Snaar took the stone and examined it carefully, "About ten thousand."

"My tog!" said one. "Ten thousand! That would mean two thousand sheep each."

"Ja, or a wa' and two span osse, ook a farm."

Stoffel looked quickly at his men, saw the greed in their eyes, and handed the gem back to Wicks.

"You keep it," he said quietly, "until we want it back—I and my men. See that you don't lose it."

The Boers looked at each other slyly, and Wicks went green with fear.

"It is yours," he said. "Take it. I am not good at keeping things."

"You will mind it very carefully, Wicks, and see that no one takes it from you." Stoffel nodded his head. "And now, Van Snaar, what about these two?"

"Fast bound, fast hold, Stoffel, but do you with them as you will. They are your prisoners;" and Van Snaar walked away.

Stoffel stroked his beard, and looked after the retreating figure thoughtfully.

"He decides nix. Everything he puts on to me, and maybe at the end he will have my neck in a loop. We will see."

So he muttered; then sharply bade his men take the prisoners to the camp. They were shoved along roughly to a "schem," built up against the bank of the river, and here they were bound, and left exposed to the full glare of the sun until late in the afternoon without food or water. Then they were jerked to their feet, and pushed into the presence of the two leaders of the gang, who were seated on rocks in their shirt-sleeves.

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"I have something to say to you, gentlemen," began Van Snaar, smoothly.

"If you give us water and loose these rheims," said Dave, "we will listen."

"Magtig! You are not tied up, are you?"

"Tied up!" said Mark with scorn. "Yes; and left to lie in the blazing sun."

"Stoffel, my friend, how is this?"

Stoffel picked up a knife, severed the rheims, and poured out a beaker of water.

"It was the work of your men, Van Snaar. They were on guard."

Van Snaar went to the mouth of the "schem," and stormed at the two men, Wicks and Brent. This done, he expressed his great concern, while Stoffel stared at him with a dry grin.

"Kerels," said the Boer, "Van Snaar stands by you. You had better please him. Verstan?"

"He called himself Futter when I met him before," said Mark, steadily.

"True, Clinton, we are old friends;" and Van Snaar showed his white teeth, which seemed to Mark all that remained of the man he had seen in London. The man looked a ruffian, with a fortnight's growth of beard that did not disguise the heavy jaws and a mouth that was perfectly straight, with thin lips—exactly the same cruel mouth he saw reproduced in some of Stoffel's band of brigands. He looked like a Boer, and was dressed like one. "Ja, Stoffel, I have met the young Englisher before, and I warned him that it would be bad if he interfered in a business that did not concern him."

Stoffel nodded his head gravely.

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"But he is young, Stoffel, and maybe when he ill-used your people so badly he was acting more with the haste of youth than with black intent;" and Van Snaar, to give him his assumed name, gave the guerilla chief a sly look.

"Ja; but his life is forfeit, and the life of this man also. They have killed my men. They blew up my wagon and goods."

"Your wagon?" said Mark with a laugh. "I thought it was ours."

"You laugh," said Stoffel, narrowing his eyes.

"He is young," said Van Snaar, soothingly. "He does not know that you have a right, the right of the veld, to hang him to the nearest tree."

"I dispute the right," said Mark, sternly; "but I admit that you are capable of carrying out any crime."

"Quite capable, Clinton, and quite ready to execute justice, unless you fall in with our wishes;" and Van Snaar leant forward, with a hard glitter in his black eyes.

"That is better!" growled Stoffel. "Yes or no."

"What do you want?" asked Dave, uneasily.

"Very little, Robey, as you will say. Compared with life—and you find life sweet—very sweet—for it is yet before you—what we ask is nothing. I have spoken with my friend, and you must understand that Rooi Stoffel does not offer terms to those who have injured him."

"Magtig, no!" said Stoffel. "I have to live!"

"And it was only by my speaking for you that Stoffel has consented to spare you."

"Ja; and I know what my men will say when they learn!" said Stoffel, sourly. "It will cost me much to

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bring them round." And he glanced aside at the two prisoners.

"What is it you want?" said Robey again.

"This; and it is a small thing to win your life, Clinton. A small thing, when I think of it; the bargain is all on your side."

"Altogether," said Stoffel.

"Listen, then. We will let you go on these terms. That you find the boy Amos, and help him in his search for the diamonds. If you find them you are to hand one-half over to us. The rest you may keep." Van Snaar fixed his eyes on Mark. "You see," he said, "how we would trust you. It is ridiculous to give you such terms."

"To think," muttered Stoffel, "that I agreed to a plan like that!"

"Because, with me, you trust them, Stoffel."

"And what of Amos?" asked Robey, quickly.

"That is for you two to decide. If you like to share with Amos, that is your affair."

"And what if you find the diamonds?"

Stoffel laughed. "What we find we keep, and what we don't find, and you do, we take half."

Dave grinned. "I see."

"You see how favourable these terms are? We spare your lives, we give you your freedom, we take you into partnership, and all we ask is that you give your solemn promise to return us one-half the diamonds in case you find them."

"You will give us till to-morrow to talk this over?"

"I will give you just one minute," said Stoffel, quietly.

Dave shrugged his shoulders, and looked at Mark, who remained silent.

"Your answer now," roared Stoffel.

"I will say this," said Robey, after another look at Mark, who kept his eyes fixed before him. "Let us go. If we find Amos we will put your plan before him. If he agrees, good; if not, I will come back, and you can do with me what you like. That hurts no one."

Mark turned his face to Dave. "Go if you like, Dave, but for my part I will enter into no agreement with these scoundrels."

"You've done it," said Dave, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Only for myself," said Mark. "Only for myself. Do what you like, Dave."

Stoffel nodded his head at Van Snaar. "Goot so," he said. "The Englander is no man for us; better hand him over to Wicks—neh?"

"Ja," said Van Snaar, with his eyes on Mark's face.

"The river is the best," said Stoffel, slowly. "It will carry him away, and save digging a grave. The ground is too hard hereabout."

Mark met the Dutchman's deep-sunk eyes with his full, clear gaze.

"Do as you will," he said.

"Verdom, we will, neef. Maybe you think I am at play. But that is not Red Stoffel's way—hoor jij! You would have been both dead but for Van Snaar, and you will not see to-morrow's sun."

"Give them till to-morrow, Stoffel. There is no hurry."

"As't bliff," muttered Dave, hoarsely. "Till to-morrow."

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Stoffel whistled, and a man came. "Take these two out, and bind them fast." He nodded his head at them, and, striding to the opening, raised his voice so that his men could hear. "Till to-morrow," he said, "and then 'Yes' or 'No.' 'Yes,' and you are free; 'No,' and——" He pointed at the river.

The men scowled at the prisoners, and muttered among themselves.

"The big one shot my brother," said one, facing Stoffel, "and we want justice."

"Ja, kerels; at sun-up."

"Now—net now. We will shoot them now."

"Sœtjes, neef, sœtjes. It is my wish that they sleep another night."

"Sœtjes! We will have no sœtjes! They have killed; it is enough. They must die, and now."

The man swung round, raising his rifle and pointing it full at Robey, but in the same motion Stoffel sprang forward, seized the barrel with his left hand, and with his right struck the man under the arm; then wrenched the weapon away, and with a swinging blow with the stock felled the other to the ground.

"So!" he said softly; then faced round, with his little eyes red, and his chin up, so that the stiff beard stood away from his chest.

The men looked away uneasily, and fell back.

"I said to-morrow! Is there any who disputes?"

"Magtig no," they muttered.

Stoffel clapped one of the men on the back. "That is daarom good, my children," he said with a laugh. "See you, in the morning, the light will be better, and in the morning we will have a shooting-match for the

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diamond as a prize, with these dogs for targets. Is that good?"

The men laughed, and went off to see the prisoners securely bound, while Stoffel helped up the man he had felled, and promised him first shot. The guerilla chief, who one moment was blazing with fury in defence of his prisoners, the next inventing a fiendish plan for their death, now acted the doctor to the injured man, while he exchanged jokes with his ruffians about the morrow's "play."

"We will tie them to the dead tree across there. Do you hear, you skepsels?"

"Why don't you answer?" said Wicks, whose hands shook because of heavy drinking. "Are you dumb?"—and he struck Dave in the mouth. "But you will cry to-morrow!"

"Before to-morrow, maybe," said Stoffel, with a quiver of his eyelid as he met Robey's glance. "They are stubborn now, but in the quiet of the night their tongues will speak. Oh, yes. Tie them fast—so, now. Because we have caught these jackals, you kerels can drink to-night. Fetch the brandy, Wicks, and sit round the fire. If your hands shake in the morning, we will have more sport."

He went away laughing, after taking the first sip from the pannikin, and the prisoners were left to themselves. From where they sat bound they could see the dead tree across the river, and their eyes returned to it again and again.

"I am sorry to have brought you to this," said Mark, after a long silence.

"Oh, ay, sonny. About two hundred and fifty yards, or three hundred, allowing for the draw of the water."

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"Do you think—?" began Mark, and stopped.

"Ja. If we don't agree to his terms he will tie us to the tree, certain. If he didn't, there would be a shindy among his men."

"Dave, you must not think of me at all. Do you understand?"

"Ja. What I think is this. Their terms mean nothing. They would not keep them—no. If we could get the diamonds, they would take the lot, and make away with us. If there are no diamonds, it would be bad for us again. Well, my thought is this—to play their own game. We will pretend to agree, and then escape. That is my plan."

"Then carry it out, Dave."

"Good! Stoffel will come to us when these men are drunk. We will agree, and he will let us go."

"Dave, it is your plan, not mine."

Dave looked across the river. "Three hundred yards; they would, maybe, hit us many times before we were dead."

"I hope," said Mark, in a whisper, as if speaking to himself, "that I shall not shrink; but I will not agree—never," he added firmly, with glowing eyes.

"Why, man, why? If they could trick us?"

"Because it is not my way," said the boy, sternly.

"Ek verstan ne," muttered Dave, lapsing into Dutch.

"Dave, they ask me to play the traitor to Amos."

"He's a nice one."

"That has nothing to do with it. All I have to think is what my father would do, and my path is clear. But I would like you to go, Dave. I would be glad to think that you were safe, when they——" He stopped, and

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looked across the sullen river to the deal tree, and a smile flickered about his lips.

"My tog," muttered Dave; "more than ever you are like my brother. He laughed too when he died. Oh, ja, now I will go with you."

"Dave, don't!"

"Ja." The big man laughed gladly. "I see it. I have heard before of this thing. My brother is like you. We will meet him over there by the tree." Then he sang—

"I will meet you, oh my hartje, I will meet you in the dawn,
When the sun's bright, in the soft light, I will meet you in the morn.
By the river, oh my bootie, by the river we will stand;
I will hear you, I will meet you, I will take you by the hand.
All de wareld, all de wareld, all de wareld was my home,
With my kettle, and my coffee, no longer will I roam."

He murmured the new words to the simple little song he had often crooned to himself on his solitary treks, and then his voice rang out gladly.

"Shut up!" said Wicks, tipsily rising to his feet, and groping for a stick, with which he struck the prisoners over the head.

"Hit me, you drunken brute!" roared Dave, "but leave my friend alone. By the Lord, if I get my hand free!"

"Let him sing," cried out a Boer; "it is mooi. Come you here, Wicks, and show me the diamond."

Wicks stumbled back, and presently the fire, in the gathering dusk of the evening, gleamed on the diamond.

"Is your head sore, sonny?" asked Dave, gently.

Mark laughed. "No, Dave; but I feel regularly done—tired out."

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"Move a little—so. Now rest your head on my shoulder."

"Nonsense! I'm not so tired as all that." But gradually the fair head nodded and sank on the broad shoulders, and Dave crooned over his song, while his eyes were fixed on the further shore. The sinking sun flooded the river with light, and the dead tree stood out gaunt in the red glow.

"It's funny!" said Mark, dreamily; "but it seems to me there is some one over by the tree."

"Ja," said Dave in a whisper; "I have seen him also. It is the little brother. He waits. He knows. He will be there in the morning."

Then the sun went down, the light died off the river, a soft wind rustled the trees, and the night was upon them. Dark it was, and presently very silent, after the revellers had sunk to sleep, with only the swish of the water and the querulous cry of the night-birds. The elder man was awake; but the young one slept, leaning heavily against his mate, who would not move his aching limbs for fear of breaking the mercy of sleep.

"Oh, ay," muttered the wagoner, "it is hard, bitter hard."

"It is hard," said a voice.

"Softly," whispered Dave; "he is asleep."

"Let him wake," and the man shook Clinton. "Wake up!" he hissed, "and keep quiet. Listen to me. Stoffel will come to you before the morning. Agree to what he says, and go; but he means you harm. You understand. He means you harm!"

"We know that, Van Snaar or Futter, whatever your name may be. We know that he meant to trick us."

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"Good! He would trick me too. Now, you agree to what he says; but cross the river, and wait for me at the dead tree. We can then plan how to get the best of him. You hear?"

"Ja; at the dead tree let it be," said Dave.

Van Snaar hurried away at a sound of some one moving, and stopped at the fire to pick up a coal to light his pipe.

"You are late, Van Snaar," said another voice.

"Ja, Stoffel; I was anxious about the prisoners, since the men are helpless from drink. It was a strange thing for you to drug them on this night."

"You were talking to the prisoners," said Stoffel, suspiciously. "Maybe you were making a plan for yourself."

"The prisoners are in your hands, Stoffel, and their fate depends on you, not me. It seems to me you grow more suspicious each day."

"Magtig!" said Stoffel, gloomily. "I have had cause since I met you, Van Snaar. But have a care. At the first sign of treachery I will shoot, though you have the whole band against me!"

"Go back and sleep, my friend. You keep awake too much; and, strong as you are, you need rest."

"Sleep! My Gott! no; not where you lie!" and Stoffel lumbered off up the bank, while Van Snaar, laughing softly, went into the scherm.

"There will be mischief done soon," muttered Dave. "Rest your head against me, sonny. It is a bit cold now."

"I shall be glad to see the sun," said Mark, wearily.

"And the dead tree," said Dave, cheerfully. "Not to

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meet Van Snaar, but the little brother. I think always of him when your head is close to me."

"I hope I shall be all right," muttered Mark, "and not show any fear."

"Not you, lad," said Dave, cheerfully, and turned his head to give relief in a sigh for the sorrow in his heart. Then he moistened his lips and crooned his song of the wagon.

"You're a regular poet," said Mark. "I like that."

"Oh, ja; often in the night, when I have been on the road, I have made up songs, but not one that I like so much as this one. It is very good," and he sang it over.

The wind sighed down the river, and Mark dropped off to sleep again. Dave sat looking with his eyes on the fire and one shoulder bent forward to keep the wind off his companion. For himself he would have agreed to any terms, and held it no shame to break them, seeing that the terms would be made in guile; but what Clinton did so would he do, for to him the young Englishman was in some way, not to be reasoned about, kin with his dead brother. In the years of his solitary trekkings he had grown to idealize the memory of the boy he had shot; and everything that was good he connected with the dead lad. It was hard for Mark, not for him, and his brain was busy trying to fetch schemes whereby Mark could escape. Then Stoffel came and sat by him—sat and smoked in silence the smoking of two pipefuls. Then he knocked the ashes out on the palm of his hand, and yawned.

"It will be sun-up in four hours, Robey."

"Ja."

"So. Sun-up, and a target for the men. Listen! I

will cut you loose, give you back your guns and your food. I will join you four hours' walk down the river by the Fall with my men; and we will go shares."

"Van Snaar made the same plan."

"I knew it," said Stoffel. "But I am the stronger; and in his heart he is black. What is it, the tree or life?"

"It is the tree, Stoffel. But I will ask my friend."

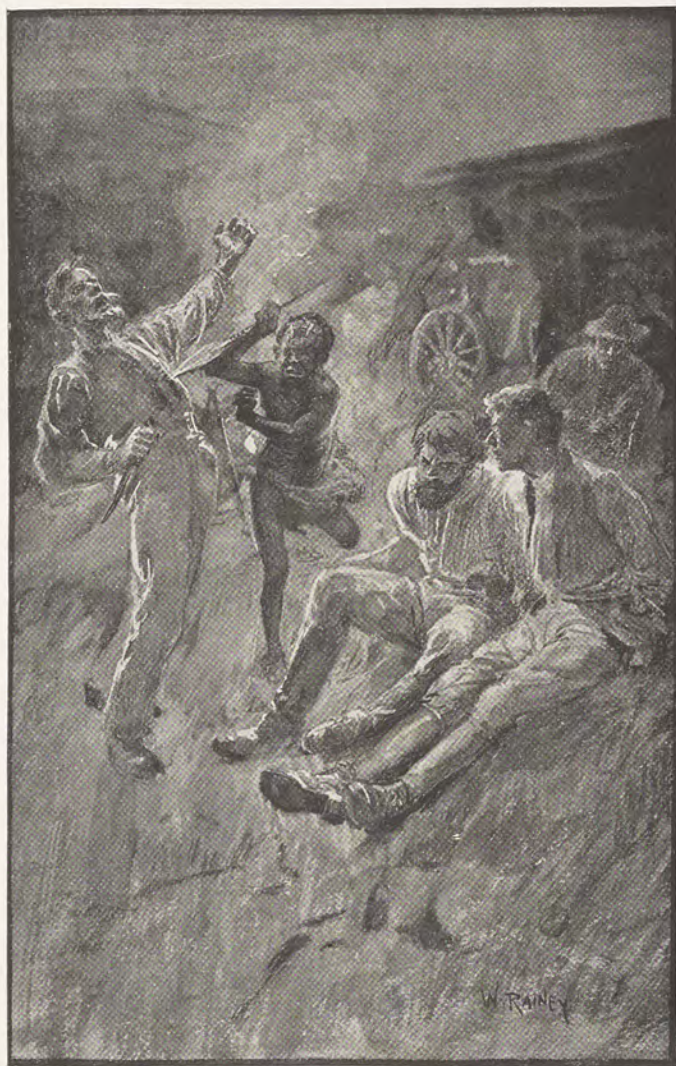
"Let him sleep. I have met his kind before." Stoffel filled his pipe mechanically. "But you, kerel, you can make your own plan—eh? You will go—neh?"

"I will stay."

"Magtig!" The guerilla lit his pipe. "Well, it matters not. There is the other boy, Amos, he will be glad to make terms. Nacht, sleep goot, for it is your last night."

"Nacht," said Dave, quietly.

Stoffel stretched, then stooped to peer into Mark's face. "All de wareld!" he muttered. "I would give much to sleep like that. He must have a good heart, kerel, a good heart, ja;" and, muttering to himself, the leader, who was afraid to sleep, went down to the water's edge, then disappeared in the dark. Dave's sleepless eyes came back to the embers and watched them die away gradually, till one glow only remained, a red spot in the dark. From the ground he looked up into the sky, and knew that the time was passing swiftly. Three hours to the dawn, if that, for some of the stars were very faint, and there were wisps of grey in the dark vault, and the feel of the early morning in the chill air. Moreover, the dik-kop was calling somewhere across the river, and the big plover feeds early. He looked back at the ash-heap, and the red glow was blotted out. Some one was



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"WICKS STAGGERED AND SANK TO THE GROUND"



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moving. The glow appeared again, and by it a dark object; then another light—curious, with a strange glitter, but not of fire. It was the diamond, of course, held in the palm of a hand. Then the man who held it stooped and blew on the wood, and Dave saw the bandaged head of Sam Wicks. He chuckled at the sight, and Wicks, hearing, started with a little cry of fear, then came soft-footed and stared into Robey's face.

"You devil!" he muttered hoarsely. "You spy; you will tell Stoffel that I am going."

"Go away," said Dave; "you're drunk."

"Oh yes, go away, and you'll tell yon sneaking hound," he snarled, and Dave heard the click of a knife-blade springing back.

"You fool!" said Dave, raising his voice; but Wicks caught him by the throat, his teeth chattering with fear all the while, and slashed.

"What is it? what's the matter?" cried Mark.

"Hist, you cub!"

"Bah!" Mark roused himself, and Dave's head fell forward. "Dave! Dave!"

"Be quiet — you! Then take that!" but the knife rattled on the stones, and Wicks, with a groan, staggered and sank to the ground.

"Is that you, Stoffel?" hailed Van Snaar from the scherm.

"Ja," said a gruff voice. "It is nothing!" and a hand was pressed on Mark's mouth.

For a time there was silence, then Van Snaar said something to himself and withdrew. Mark, staring wildly into the dark, saw a form for an instant stoop over Wicks, then leap away. The man standing saw it too, and started,

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uttering a low cry; then, with a knife, he cut the bonds.

“Come quick,” he said in a whisper.

“I can’t leave Robey.”

“Eh?”

“There is something the matter with him. Who are you? What does it all mean?”

Dave groaned.

“I tell you, come—come!” said the other in suppressed excitement. “Catch him by the arm.”

The two lifted Dave to his feet. He swayed a little, then seemed to recover. Then slowly they went off down to the river and into the water.

“Don’t lift your feet—move them quietly so they won’t splash.”

“It’s Amos,” said Mark, in a breathless whisper, and standing still.

“My tog! Keep moving.”

“Amos!” muttered Dave, dully. “Amos! I thought it was Wicks.”

“Keep on—further—slowly. No, stop—stop; and sit down to your chin in the water.”

CHAPTER XXIV

DOWN THE RIVER

As they crouched in the river there came a fierce shout from the bank.

“Opstan! opstan! Wicks es dood!” It was Red Stoffel calling. “And the prisoners have gone! Spread out! Down to the river and up the banks! They must be near!”

There came guttural exclamations; then fierce shouts, as the men saw what had happened, and the clatter of feet over the stones; then the light of a lantern, throwing its light this way and that, with a dark form behind it.

“What is that?” cried a sharp voice—that of Van Snaar. “Wicks murdered, and the prisoners gone!”

“Verdom, ja!” roared Stoffel.

“You will answer for that, Stoffel,” answered Van Snaar, “before your men!”

“What—what is that? I was by the prisoners just now, and they were fast bound!”

“You were; and now they are gone—eh?” And there was a triumphant note in Van Snaar’s voice, which he raised so that the men paused silently to listen.

“To the river!” said Stoffel. “Here is blood—see—fresh blood—on the stones! We will find them, and then I will answer you, Van Snaar!”

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The lantern approached the river, and behind it came the men, their faces showing in the reflection.

"If they come in," muttered Amos, "we must move quickly. But not yet. Keep quiet!"

They watched the light grow red on the water, and saw Stoffel hold the lantern above his head as he peered out.

"Right in! They have gone across! I will cross!"

"Very likely," sneered Van Snaar. "And, once across, you will get away with the diamond!"

"I tell you," roared Stoffel, in a fury, "I know nothing of this! There is the blood. See for yourself."

"Ja, it is true," said one.

"Then take the light and go across yourself! I will stay and answer this thing for myself!"

The man took the lantern, but it tumbled from his grasp as, from the darkness behind, there rose the fearful wailing cry, ending in a savage laugh.

"I knew it," muttered Amos. "The little brown man! I saw him."

One of the burghers discharged his rifle in the direction of the noise, and then all stood, and from the bank above them there sounded a shrill mocking laugh. Then, with oaths, the men dashed forward, stumbling over the stones, and as they went Amos gave the signal. A few yards they covered, then came the plaintive whistle of the dik-kop, and Amos steered to the left, till the water was up to their arm-pits. There they found Sixpence, with the light trunk of a dead tree anchored against a jutting rock.

"I feel bad," said Dave, in a weak voice, "and my head is sore!"

"Put your arms over the tree—so. Now I will tie a

rheim round, and, with one on each side, you will be right. Hold to that branch, Clinton, and let your feet go free. I will take this side; and, Sixpence, you take the other end—so. Shove it off.”

The tree glided out, and the weight of the four men being at one end, it swung round end on, and was soon in mid-stream, swept along at a good five miles an hour.

Mark had many questions clamouring for an answer, but, with the wash of the river rising continually to his mouth, it was no time to speak. He held on, kicking out occasionally with his feet; while, after each dip and roll of the raft, he felt Dave’s face.

“Is it far?” he asked once.

“Not so far,” said Amos.

“Dave is very still! Can’t we land?”

“Soon—soon. His face is out of the water.”

From up river rang out the dull report of a rifle, and then of another, and then a long spell of silence followed, broken by the wash of the water which by-and-by gradually merged into a rumbling noise. The tree, at one point, ran into a cross-current and swung round, threatening to roll over, and the efforts to keep it as it were on an even keel brought it near the shore. Mark took hold of a branch, and steadied it.

“No farther,” he said, “until we have seen to Dave. Dave, can you hear me?”

“Ja. I can hear well. But it is wonder-like this moving without walking!”

“Shall we go on?”

“Ja,” he said slowly, as if his mind were groping in the dark; “let us go on. Maybe we will meet the klein broer over across. I think so.”

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"There is food and fire where we go," whispered Amos, "and it is only a little further."

"Can't we walk?"

"Better go by river. Leaves no spoor, and it's quicker."

They shoved their strange craft out into the current, and were swept down at an increasing speed with the light changing swiftly to a cold grey, and the booming sound growing louder.

"What's that noise?" asked Mark.

"The Falls—'bout a mile off."

"By Jove!"

"It's all right," said Amos. "The current 'll wash us in, and all we've got to do is to catch hold."

"And if we don't?"

"But we will, I say."

"All right," said Mark, but the explanation opened up a new source of anxiety, and with the booming rapidly taking on a threatening roar, he could not keep his mind off the idea of a sudden sickening plunge into some unknown depth.

"Look out, Sixpence!" cried Amos. "There's our landing-place, Clinton. Catch hole o' anything that comes in reach."

Mark saw a dark spit looming up ahead, and the next moment almost the tree struck into the bank with a crash, swung round, and crashed into some rocks, over which hung a few draggled branches.

"Catch hole!"

Mark seized hold of a wet sapling, which slipped through his hand, then grasped a tougher bough, and for a moment it felt as if his arm would be rooted out. The old tree came to a rest. Amos loosed the lashings about

Dave, and getting a footing dragged him ashore. The others followed, and the tree, bumping along, rolled out of sight.

"That was a near shave," said Mark, panting.

"It was that, by gum!" and Amos sat down all in a tremble. "It looked to me from the bank easy as wink-in' when I seen other trees brought in there by the current. Ghoisters! I missed my grip, and then all of a sudden I seemed to see us goin' over."

"Is it deep over?"

"Deep! My thunder! Fire! Sixpence, baleka, baleka! (quick). We'll get a cup o' hot coffee into us, and then scoot, if Dave's up to it."

They helped Dave up the bank to a little clearing in the bush, where blankets were spread on the ground, and they soon had a blanket round him in place of his streaming clothes. He tried feebly to resist, saying that he was no baby, but in the grey light they saw that his face was white and his hair matted with blood. With warm water from the kettle Amos bathed the wound and exposed a jagged cut on the side of the head, made evidently by the haft of a hunting-knife, for there was another sharp wound in the shoulder, which was swollen. After the washing he cut away the hair, made a poultice of leaves, and bound a handkerchief round. Then Dave was made to drink a cup of hot coffee, and was better.

"Pipe and twaak as't bliff?" he said.

Amos handed it, and then drank his coffee, and stared at his two old friends, while the one sipped eagerly and the other smoked.

"I s'pose," said Amos, "you chaps have got something to say to me?"

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Dave took his pipe out, and then put it back, while Mark looked round for food, saw an ash-cookie, and began to munch hungrily.

"Let's have it out!" said Amos, gruffly.

Dave put his hand to his head, looked around him, and then glanced at Mark with a look of inquiry.

"What we want to know," said Mark gravely, as he picked a bit of cinder out of the damper, "is this: how did this thing happen? Where did you come from? And how did Dave get his wound?"

Dave nodded.

"So? Well, it won't take long to tell. I were across the river watching Stoffel's gang, when I see you run right into them. So I just hid and waited, and saw you led up before Stoffel. After that you were tied up. So I came back here to where our camp was to get food, and on the way I noticed how the current carried the driftwood to this place which sticks out. That gave me a plan. In the afternoon I went back with Sixpence to watch, and soon's it was dark we crost, swimming and wading with that ole tree. I just waited in the water I dunno how long till all seemed still; but when I crep out there was a man by the fire. I nearly run—I did so—but he began rowing Dave, and under cover of his noise I cut you loose. That's about all there is to it."

"What became of Wicks?" asked Dave, in a low voice.

"The Tikoloshe—that's what!"

"Eh?"

"Ja; I yeard his cry—so did Clinton. He came like a shadder 'twixt me and Wicks, and struck him down."

"I saw something," said Mark.

"Ja; and now?"

"And now, Si Amos, I want to shake hands with you."

"Me too?" said Dave.

"Maybe you've forgot the way I give you the slip over yonder?" and Amos was white about the lips.

"We have forgotten all that, Si. All I know is that you have saved our lives at your own risk."

Amos's lean throat gulped as he took Mark's strong hand, and then he turned hesitatingly to Dave.

"There is one thing," said Dave, slowly, puffing in between. "My head is still sore, and I cannot understand well; but I say this—no one but Si Amos would have thought of that plan to save us. It was a good plan."

"Danke, Dave."

"Ja; but wait. For me I do not care. But with our friend here it was different."

"Never mind me," said Mark, quickly, with a distressed look at Amos's set face.

"Oh, ja; I will say what is in my mind. It was our work, yours and mine, to give our best for this friend. And you left him—how is this, Amos?"

"I know." Amos struggled with his voice. "I am sorry; else I have nix to say."

"Shake hands, you two," said Mark. "Who am I that I should stand between you? We each share and share alike henceforth in whatever comes of good fortune or bad."

"Ja," muttered Amos.

"Now, if you bear me no bad thoughts for what I have said, and it is done with, we are good friends again."

They joined hands in a hearty grip, and then, as Dave sat down again, wrapping his blanket round him, he fixed his eyes on Mark.

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"It was not the little brother we met—not the same, eh?—but another. Still, he was near by; ja, he was near."

"Who was this?" asked Amos.

"We thought to meet my klein broer this morning by the dead tree on the river, Si. Ja; that's so. Stoffel promised to make a target of us for his men to shoot at for the diamond, as a prize. They will have to shoot at another mark now—eh?"

"My ghoisters! I thought those two would make it hard for you. They would shoot at you; and for the diamond? The same diamond that was with the kleintje. Where is the little one?"

"Gone. It went while Mark and I were at the river. The diamond was there on a rock, but the kleintje was gone—altogether gone. Mark here thinks yet it was a real baby; but, tell me, how can a baby walk?"

"You say it, Dave. It is the little brown man, and it is strange how he stands by you and Clinton. Tell me, how did you get away from the wagon?"

The story of the escape and of the place where the oxen and food were left was told, and Sixpence was sent back with directions from Dave how to reach the laagte, and where to find the bundle of things he had hidden. The Kaffir was to keep well away from the river, and was to join the party under the Falls on the left bank after he had taken half the goods in the parcel. As he went one way, the rest went the other, and by-and-by reached a spot which commanded a view of the face of the Falls. There was no mighty rush of water from bank to bank, and the river only covered a small part of the width; but there was a sense of grandeur conveyed in the vast rocks, huge and grey, which rose one on the other, in size

like houses, from the bed below to the brink above, shutting in between them the white waters which rushed and foamed and roared down a slanting path, broken into little secondary falls, and terminating in a grand plunge, which sent the spray sifting through the air in a cloud that reflected the sun's light in vivid colours.

"I should like to sit and watch," said Mark.

"Oh ay, in the shade there by that rock."

"Ja, we can sit," said Amos, climbing out to the rock, and resting his back against it. "Now let us look at the plan. Already I have looked and looked, but the more I looked from the bit of paper to these rocks I got more mixed. See here."

He spread out the paper. "Here is the rainbow—the little mark, and there is the real thing maybe a mile across, and changing always."

"Ja, dancing like the water-flies."

"And the sound of it greater than the roar of the sea at the Kareiga, Amos."

"Never mind the sound. Here is the baboon, and the baboon's eye in the plan. Tell me what it means."

"But I thought you knew all about it? Stoffel and Van Snaar think you have only to place your hand on the diamonds."

"Auch! The noise gets in my head. There, look at the plan and read it, you two."

Robey studied the bit of paper and shook his head. "To me it is a child's picture," he said. "Who made it, made it for his own eye. What say, Clinton?"

Mark looked round at the wild scene, at the great bare rocks that had been rounded by the floods, at the mist and rainbow.

"It is all strange. We must stay here until the newness has worn off, and then study it. All we can do now is to find a hiding-place, and it seems to me we could not do better than get right in among these rocks, and the higher up and the nearer the water the better. Down below we should be overlooked, and on the banks we should stand a chance of capture."

Setting the example, Mark edged his way along a ledge to the shoulder of a vast boulder, that rested on another, seemingly as large as the dome of St. Paul's, and from this point he ran up the sloping sides of another great rock to a second platform. Above this towered another slaty grey mass reaching up almost to the lip of the Falls above, and Mark looked up with a speculative eye. The only path was what mountaineers call a "chimney," a crack traversing the wall of rock, and he made for it.

"Come away," cried Robey. "That is no place for a man."

"It is a baboon's track," said Amos. "I might climb up, but you can't, Mark."

Mark ran his eye along the chimney, and squirmed up, using his shoulders, toes, and fingers, as he had been taught to use them among the dolomites. Up and up he went, resting at intervals, and finally, to the huge relief of Robey, he wriggled over the top, and disappeared. Mark stood up on a ledge, polished smooth by the action of water, and the wind blowing up from below nearly capsized him, but, steadying himself against the wall, he moved gingerly round a buttress, stepped across a little chasm, and was face to face with a deep-pointed arch made by two slabs resting against each other.

He whooped in triumph, for it was the very place, big enough to shelter ten men, and so placed that it could not be overlooked. On the far side the opening was partly covered by the side of a boulder, leaving a space that could be closed by a blanket, and the wide entrance overlooked the country below the Falls. For miles he could trace the course of the river, winding through a waste of barren country, bathed in the brilliant sunlight. For some time he stood looking out upon the bare bones of the dry land, with the damp refreshing wind blowing in his face. Then he passed through the arch, and stood with a gasp, arrested by the spectacle of the milk-white wave plunging with a fine curve sheer down to a ledge of rock, whence it flashed and boiled over a cascade before making another plunge to depths unseen, from which rose a cloud of spray, that sparkled in the white light. He shouted, but his voice was lost in the mighty roar of the waters. Beneath his feet he felt the solid rocks quiver with the thundering blows, then with a deep sigh of awe he went back subdued to the top of the chimney, which he descended.

"By gum, I'm glad you're down safe," said Dave, with relief.

"And what did you see?" asked Amos. "Somethin' skeered you—eh?"

"I came right on the Falls, and they are splendid. You must go up. There is a house up there, ready made."

"Not me," said Dave.

CHAPTER XXV

UNDER THE FALLS

They searched about among these titanic rocks without finding any place that would serve as a hiding, and passed the night in a thicket of bush on the banks, waiting for Sixpence, who did not turn up till the next morning. He had the package with him, but reported that the Boers were on the other side at the head of the Falls.

"We must climb up to the place I found," said Mark. "There is no danger, Dave. I will go up first with these three rheims Sixpence has brought, and by their aid you can follow me in stages."

"Allamagtig," muttered Dave, "I don't like it;" but nevertheless, when the rheim was lowered by Mark from the first secure stopping-place up the chimney, he squeezed in and squirmed up to the first stage, then on to the next, finally reaching the top, very red in the face, and minus much skin. The packages of food followed, and then Sixpence and Amos, who did without the rheims. Once in the arch, they all agreed there could not be a better hiding. All hands set to work making the place ship-shape by gathering armfuls of dried rushes for bedding and driftwood for fire, which they found in plenty in the fissures of the rocks.

"All we have to fear," said Dave, "is a flood. My tog, if the river 'come down,' where should we be?"

"We are not going to stay here long," said Mark. "We could not if we would;" and he began to measure out the food. The supplies carried by Amos and Sixpence were nearly exhausted, but the half of Dave's bundle contained a supply of meal which was measured into forty-eight handfuls, a jar of brandy, a tin of beef-fluid, a bottle of lemon-juice, about two pounds of coffee, the same of sugar, and a roll of Boer tobacco.

Dave seized on the tobacco. "The mooi tabak," he cried. "Now we are all right."

"Ja," said Amos, "we can now have a square meal."

"All you'll have," said Mark, "is one handful of meal each in the day, and two cups of coffee. That means twelve days' food."

"Twelve days' starvation, you mean."

"Dave can have a cup of broth now with a 'stick' of brandy in it, and then he must go to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep."

"Those are the orders. Sixpence, put the kettle on."

The Kaffir filled the kettle from a little pool near the Falls. Dave had his broth, and muttering that he was not tired, he nevertheless stretched himself on the couch of rushes, and was asleep in a brace of shakes.

The other three went off for a wash, each in his own way. Sixpence polished his teeth with a bit of wood, then polished his feet on a rock, scooping up water with his hand, and singing to himself of the joys of the land he had left. Mark stood up under a shower-bath, a pattern in black, white, and brown, his fore-arms being almost burnt black, his neck and face brown, and his body white. Amos sat with his feet in a pool, his pipe in his mouth, and his brown eyes fixed in a stare on the falling river.

Then Mark washed his clothes, spread them out on a rock to dry, and sat down in the sun. There they remained for hours, dreaming and watching the magnificent glory of the waters, dressing by degrees; and then Mark looked up and across the flood, and saw the figure of a man outlined on a pinnacle of rock on the far side. He signalled to Amos, and the latter instinctively crouched down as a wild animal does when it sees an enemy. The man stood, his hands resting on his gun, staring down into the valley far below. If he looked across he must see them. Amos threw a pebble, and Sixpence jerked his thumb up and made a sign for the others to follow him. Going on his hands and toes, he sidled off towards the retreat with the action of a baboon; Sixpence followed with equal agility, and Mark shambled off, rolling over, and then scrambling under cover as a bullet smacked against the rock by his side.

"Ghoisters!" said Amos. "It's Van Snaar. Lucky he didn't see us."

"But he did," said Mark, "and fired; the bullet struck beside me."

They peered round the rock, but the man on the height beyond had been joined by another, and the two of them were looking unconcernedly into the valley.

"Took you for a baboon," said Amos, with a grin; "but it shows we've got to be careful."

In the afternoon before dusk a great flock of Namaqua partridges wheeled over their shelter to settle near by, where they drank at a pool, and Amos immediately set to work making snares, finding material by shredding a bit of canvas. He set his snares at dusk, and in the morning had several brace of plump birds—a good fortune which

attended his efforts most of the time they were there, much to the general satisfaction. But they had not come all that way to catch birds or admire the view, and the next day they began to chafe. Their retreat was virtually a prison, for always there were some men prowling about on the banks below, while on the high rock beyond the Falls a sentry was on duty all through the day. On the second day, Mark, after dodging out to enjoy his shower-bath, was standing back in the shadows watching the descending waters, when he was tempted nearer by the sight of a large cluster of ferns growing from the velvet-green curtain of moss on the walls. As he entered within the radius of the fine cloud-like mist, he found the footing very slippery, but by going cautiously he arrived at the ferns, which, however, lost their attraction in the presence of a startling discovery. Before him, now that he had pierced the mist, there stretched a long gallery dimly lit, with the falling sheet of water on the left, and the black, glistening walls of the precipice on the right. The floor of this gallery reached away into the gloom, some yards in width, covered with pools of water and loose stones. A hollow booming issued from the gallery or tunnel, borne by a moist current of air, which formed drops on his face and clothing. He advanced a few yards very slowly, and struggled with a slight feeling of giddiness, produced by the rapid glancing of the water on his left, then went on a little further, and a little further yet, with his heart thumping at his ribs. His foot slipped on a loose stone, he staggered forward with his hands out, felt a smashing blow on his left arm, remained a moment almost stupefied, then gradually worked himself back and up, where he stood trembling like a leaf. Very slowly he went back,

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feeling with his feet, and keeping his eyes on the rock, until he staggered out through the mist into the light of day, when he collapsed.

"My God!" said Dave, "we thought you had fallen over."

Amos flew to the shelter, and returned with a drop of brandy. Then they helped him back.

"I'm sorry," said Mark with a little laugh, "I went in there."

"Look at your arm," said Dave.

Mark stared at his arm. The shirt was torn into tatters, and the flesh was bruised and swollen already, with the blood showing red through the skin.

"It's hollow under there. I went in, but I slipped, and my arm was touched by the water."

"You mustn't do that again," said Dave, huskily. "It's not right to us."

"Never again unless there is some one with me." Mark looked at them. "I should not have gone alone, but I am not sorry I went, for the discovery may be of use. One of you must come with me next time."

"No, no; better lose all the diamonds that ever were than lose your life."

"Is it light in there?" asked Amos.

"Light enough to see. We must find out whether the gallery leads right across. With a rheim from one to the other there should be no danger."

"I am game to try, Mark, now, if you feel strong enough."

"I am all right now, but I was horribly scared."

"All de wareld! I should think so," said Dave; "and you two will stay here."

"Nonsense! Don't you see that if there is a path right across, we can get over without being seen? It's like one of those secret passages you hear of."

"I ain't heard of any secret passages."

"But he is right," said Amos. "The diamonds are on that side."

"How do you know?" said Dave, quietly.

"I bin figuring it out, that's why, and I know."

"You're guessing, maybe?"

"No, I ain't. The diamonds are over there, and if there's a way across, we've got to find it."

"And you're willing to risk your life under that thundering splash, a touch of which is enough to most break a man's arm?"

"I mean to get them diamonds!" said Amos, fiercely.

"Then you can go," said Davey, "but"—and he suddenly seized Amos by the arm—"you'll answer my questions first."

"What do you mean?" cried Amos, trying to free himself from the heavy grip.

"Dave, let go! let go, do you hear?" shouted Mark.

"I hear. Just you wait. Look me in the eyes, Si—so. Now answer me fair. Are you meaning fair by us?"

"Ja, Dave."

"Then tell us what you have found out. No keeping back anything. Out with it, or you don't move."

"Let me go, and I'll tell you. If you don't I won't—not a word!"

Dave let go reluctantly, but he kept his stern eyes on the other's face.

"I found out what is meant by the 'Baboon's eye.'"

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"You have?" shouted Mark.

"And you meant to keep it to yourself," said Dave, sternly.

"I didn't. I wanted to find out if the diamonds were there first. I said I would play fair, and so I will, if you'll let me."

"I'll not hinder you," said Dave, grimly. "And where is the 'Baboon's eye'?"

"You've seen it every hour of this day;" and Amos grinned. "Take a look at that chap over on the other side up there."

Both Dave and Mark went to the door of the shelter, and looked across eagerly.

"Where is it?" said Dave, turning with an angry frown.

"I told you. Over there. See the rock where the chap stands—that's the baboon's forehead, sideways on. That dark hollow beneath is the baboon's eye, the rock below sticking out is the baboon's snout."

"I see," shouted Mark—"yes, quite plain; don't you, Dave?"

"I'm jiggered if I can see anything but rock."

"Narrow your eyes, and try to take in the whole outline at once. Now don't you see?"

Dave screwed up his eyes. "Well, it might be a baboon, but it ain't; it's a rock, and no one ever saw a baboon as big as that! Why, hang it, the crittur would be as big as a mountain!"

"It's as clear as day. The wonder is we did not see the resemblance at once. And you think, Amos, that is the spot where the diamonds are?"

"Ja, Clinton; and it's in my mind that we can only

reach it from this side—'cos why?—'cos you can only see the baboon's head from here. Go back over there, and it's only a big rock standing out."

Mark tried the view from different points, but, as Amos said, it was only from the door of the cave or arch that the resemblance was striking.

"Now I guess we'll go along this gallery of yours, Mark."

"All right," said Dave; "but mind this, Amos, don't keep anything to yourself. If you find out anything, good or bad, let us judge for ourselves straight away."

The two set off, dodging across the open space to the shadow of the precipice, and plunging into the mist. Once in the strange gallery between the dead rock and the living wall of water, they paused for some moments to steady their nerves, then Mark led, and Amos followed the length of the rheim. They hugged the wet wall as close as they could, and felt for a footing at each step, keeping their eyes away from the water. Their progress was very slow, and at points where the ledge narrowed, and the edge of the rock underneath was as slippery as glass, they had to crawl along. At one place there was a deep recess, where they halted a few minutes. In the soft twilight that struggled through the foaming curtain of water they could see the rocks about them, and Amos discovered a rust-covered pocket-knife, which crumbled to pieces in his hand.

The find heartened them up. Their eyes glistened at the sight of the rust-flakes. They nodded their heads at each other, and then went on, determined to go where there was no doubt some one had been before. Another

fifty yards or so they went, though to them the distance seemed a mile at least; then to their lungs there came a gust of pure air, and across their eyes the dazzling light of day. There was a break in the sheet of water, caused by a projecting rock over the brink above; but the ledge ran on, and carried them once more into the dim, moist air of another gallery, which was the more uncomfortable because the flow of water at that point was not strong enough to carry it sheer over. Instead, it splashed on the ledge, without, however, being of sufficient weight to hurl them off. Drenched from top to toe, with hair plastered down, they at last reached the far end free of the mist, and stood on a dry spot up against a tall buttress, while the water trickled off in streams. A sip of brandy from a flask warmed them up, and then they edged round the buttress, and found further progress blocked by a yawning hole at their feet. Beyond was the wall of rock, which rose up to the pinnacle on which the Boer sentry was stationed. They could see his shadow thrown at intervals on a taller fragment as he walked to and fro, but him they could not see, nor anything else but the blurred outline of the valley far below seen through the mist. The hole was about twenty feet in diameter, as they reckoned, and was filled to within a few feet of the rim by a litter of rubbish washed down evidently by the high floods.

"Is this all?" asked Mark, in a tone of bitter disappointment.

Amos stared down and around, went down on his stomach and searched the round walls of the hole to see if there was a crack or fissure; but evidently this was the end; this "blind alley," this pit that gave forth a fetid breath from decaying vegetation and the putrid bodies of

mud-fish and other creatures caught by the last flood. He sent a stone into it in a fit of rage, and a black cloud of small flies rose from the rubbish-heaps and sent them back into the clammy mist to face the dangers of the back passage, this time without the buoying support of hope.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LITTLE BROWN MAN

They got back to the shelter of their arch safe, but with an attack of shivers bordering on ague. They were doctored, sent to bed, and kept in bed for the greater part of the next day, when Dave made them drink some fearful compound with ashes in it, and other stuff more mysterious and much more nasty. He said he always used it for his oxen when they were ill; and, being low-spirited and not inclined to argue the point that they were not oxen, they drank the stuff and bolted behind the rock, where each struggled with a private volcano in his interior. They returned empty, but not without indignation, breathing threats against Robey.

Dave shrugged his shoulders, passed them a roast partridge apiece, with a fragment of damper, and then sat hunched up with his face in his hands. Sixpence brooded by himself at the other end of the cave; and it was evident that things were ripening for a mutiny or a retreat.

"Cheer up!" said Amos, pleasantly. "We'll soon be dead."

Mark crunched the last leg between his white teeth, then filled his pipe, and hooked out a live coal with his long forefinger.

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"We've got to pull ourselves together," he said, with authority, "and take a tighter grip of things. It is absurd to give up because we did not succeed in the very first attempt. What do you say, Dave?"

"I say this"—Dave removed his hands from his face, and tapped his open palm with his fingers. "There is no bigger fool than Dave Robey. He had a wagon, oxen, a little money, and a quiet life. To-day he has nix. Ask me nothing, for I know nothing."

"It is not so bad as all that, Dave."

"My uncle," said Amos, "outspanned about a day's walk, where there was olifants bosch for the oxen. I saw the wagon there the day before I saw you caught by Stoffel."

"Well, what has that to do with us?"

"There were two men there. One was Brent." And Amos looked at Dave.

"All right, old fellow; we'll talk of that another time. What we have to do now is to find out what the Dutchmen and your uncle are about. We must leave this place for the valley below, and search closely. Since the diamonds are not over there, they must be at the bottom."

"Maybe," said Amos. "There are only two now at the outspan."

"And toe," said Dave.

"Maybe we two could scout that way. Maybe we could take the wagon and oxen. Some of them are your own, Dave—the mooi vaal span."

"Ja, I think so," said Dave, waking up. "It is a good plan. Sixpence can go to the laagte for the rest of the food that was hid away by me. You and I will find where the wagon lies, and see how we could take it.

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Clinton will stay here until we come back, for it is best to have a good hiding until we have our plans quite ready."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Mark, in disgust, "that you are thinking of giving up the search after all the trouble we have been through to get here?"

"It is five hundred miles back to Burnt Kraal," said Dave, slowly. "We have no wagon. Of what use the diamonds if we could not get back—eh? Nix good. Amos says well. I had thought there was no way out. But see, if we get their wagon—or if we can plan how to get their wagon, then we will come to the search with more hope."

"Why not make the search first, and think about the wagon afterwards?"

"The other way is best," said Dave. "If we go now, we will be back to-night."

So Mark was left to himself; for he saw that Dave was bent on carrying out the idea; but he took an opportunity of expressing his opinion to Amos upon his apparent weakening.

"For myself," said Amos, "I will be the last one to give up; but I could see Dave was sore. A Boer fights well when he knows he can get away when he likes—see? Dave is in some things like that. Be certain I will not give up."

"All right, then; but be careful."

"Oh ja. I will bring him back. If it is dark, you will know we come by hearing the jackal's cry over by the 'chimney,' as you call it. So long!"

They went off, taking both the guns; and Mark was left alone on the rock. He sat in the shadow of a huge boulder, watching the plunge and foam of the waters; the

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play of colours on the mist, and the far view that stretched out into the blue of the distant horizon—sat and watched hour after hour, with the thunder of the Falls in his ears, and the soft wind blowing in his face. Then, when the shadow shifted till his head was in the glare, he rose up and baked his handful of meal in the ashes, and made a weak cup of coffee from the previous day's "grounds." There was the long afternoon to get through; and he moved about restlessly, looking about for any sign of the Dutchmen. But the sentinel on the high rock had not been at his post that day; and he walked along the ledge to the small platform towards the "chimney," whence he commanded a new view of the country below, and of the sides of the left banks. Looking down, he saw a flock of rock-pigeons sweep out from a tree, circle out through the mist, and dart down—down to the river-bed far beneath. From their flight he knew they had been startled; and his gaze went back to the spot they had started from. This was a fig-tree, with its roots apparently in the rock; and to his astonishment he saw the figure of a man, dwarfed by the distance, pass behind the trunk; then a little puff of smoke. He listened for the clap of the report; but if it was a gun-shot the sound was drowned in the prevailing roar of the waters. The man, however, reappeared; and he plainly saw him swing up, hand over hand, to higher ground, where he paused to wave his hat to some one below, before hurrying on. In a few moments another figure passed behind the fig tree, climbed up where the other had, and ran forward. Mark stood up to see, but his view was blocked by a boulder to the left; and he fixed his eyes on the large tree, to see if any others followed. He stood straining his eyes for about ten

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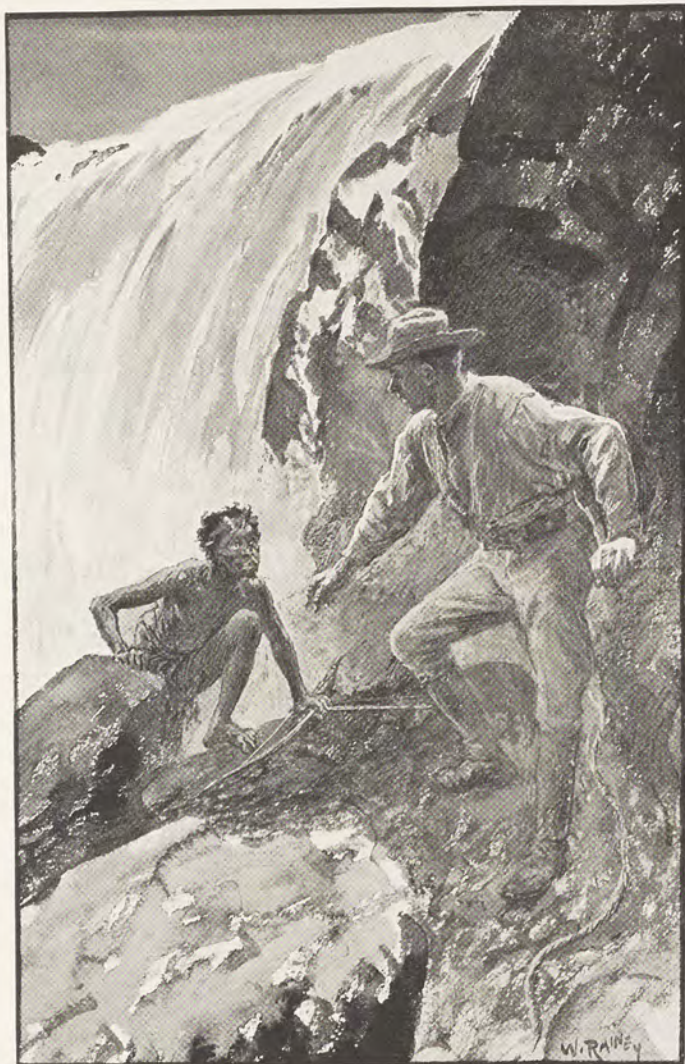
minutes, when, without the slightest noise to warn him, his attention was attracted by a movement at his feet, and looking down, he met the fierce and startled gaze of a human face, peering over the top of the "chimney"—a face so small that it was no bigger than that of a monkey, and with a fearful ape-like look from the brightness of the little deep-set eyes, the flat nose, and wide thin-lipped mouth. Almost instinctively Mark took the wisest course—he held out a hand to help the creature. The little restless eyes ranged over him; then the head was raised to peer along the ledge, showing a round head, covered with small knots of wool. Then came up a little bow, with the arrow nitched; and the eyes looked threatening.

Mark smiled, stood back, and waved his hand, signifying there was room to pass.

With a few curious clicks the creature stood up, gave another glance at Mark, then went down full length, and from the chimney hauled up a tiny baby.

"Polly!" gasped Mark, "by all that's wonderful!" and the little thing, seeing him, set up a cry, holding out its small arms, grown again very thin.

The little man, who at full length stood about three feet, with a round paunch, thin limbs, and knobby joints, passed the infant to Mark, and then went down again, this time drawing up a woman, who, in a moment, fled like a shadow along the ledge. The little man, with a click or two and a manner of great excitement, snatched the baby, and ran after, leaving Mark too amazed to do aught than stare; and as he stared a bullet whizzed by his head, and smacked against the rock, the splinters stinging his neck. He threw himself down flat, and with his wits about him, crawled to where lay a large loose stone they



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"HE HELD OUT A HAND TO HELP THE CREATURE"



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had used to block the exit from the "chimney," and rolled it into position. This done, he clapped a finger into his mouth because of the pain of it, and went faint from the taste of blood. He held his hand before him, and saw that the third finger was smashed at the first joint, a bullet evidently fired from below as he placed the stone having struck it. He crawled round the bend, rose up, and staggered to the arch, where he bathed the wound; and then started awkwardly to bind up the finger, but the jarring of the bones brought the cold sweat to his forehead, and wrung a groan from his lips. Then he thought of the little people, and, staggering through the arch, saw them standing near the Falls, looking his way. He held his hand up, and the man came cautiously up. Mark held his wrist, shut his teeth, and sat down. The man with his restless monkey-eyes came forward step by step, gave a glance at Mark, and passed on. Presently he came back, took Mark's wrist in his little hand, felt the injured finger, then with a sudden fierce look into the white face, spoke rapidly in his clicking tongue.

Mark nodded, thinking the other had suggested some treatment, and not caring what it was so long as it was done quickly.

The little man washed his mouth out, took the finger between his teeth, and bit it clean through. Then he washed the joint, made a thick paste with boiling water from the kettle, a handful of meal, wood-ash, and dried leaves from his bag, clapped it over the stump, and bound it round, his little eyes all the time on the move. Then he peered into Mark's face, made a sudden pounce on the bag of meal, picked up a blanket, and fled. Mark, holding his throbbing head up, mixed himself a beaker of weak

brandy-and-water, and then sat down, feeling weak, to battle with the pain. It needed all his grit to bear the agony in silence, but he resisted the strong prompting to tear off the hot, burning poultice, and gradually, as the paste cooled, the throbbing lessened, until, when the poultice had caked into a hard mass, the pain was nothing much. Then his thoughts went to his companions, and he stirred himself. If they returned while the Boers were still out on the rocks by the "chimney," they would be shot or captured; and it was clearly his duty to be on the spot to give them warning. He took a glance round, first of all, and saw that the little people had made a fire as near the Falls as they could get without having the fire extinguished by the mist. The woman snatched up the baby and prepared to run, but the man went on eating though he reached out a foot and seized his bow with his toes. Mark held up his hands, palm outwards, in sign of friendship, then looked up across the Falls to the rock shaped like a baboon's head, and there he saw several men, one of whom was looking down through a glass. The man with the glass waved his hand, as if beckoning, and Mark took a step forward into the open, then immediately fell back, for he saw a little puff of smoke dart out from a point where one man was lying down. A second's delay and he would have been struck down; for the bullet flattened against the rock within a foot of the arch, at the very spot covered by his body. He struck against the slant of the arch as he leapt back, rolling over, and drew his feet in. Then he crossed the room, went flat on his stomach, and peeped round the other side. The men were standing in a knot on the rock, and one was shaking hands, evidently with the man who had fired. Mark drew back. He

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judged they believed from the way he fell that he had been hit, and he resolved to keep hid until dusk, hoping fervently that Dave and Amos would not arrive until after dark. Defenceless as he was, he could do nothing.

The afternoon was very long in passing, and all the time his eyes were fixed on the bend leading from the ledge above the "chimney." If the Boers climbed up he was as good as dead, with his retreat to the gallery behind the Falls cut off, and, what was more in his thoughts, his comrades would then be lost, for they would, if they arrived, unconsciously walk right into the trap. So he sat with dry lips and hard bright eyes, while the sun went slowly down the curve to the west, and the ink-black shadows crawled round from left to right. The first sign of approaching evening was the flight of sprews, the South African starling, from the valley below to the shelter of a cave, which had been their roosting-place for centuries. Then came the Namaqua partridges for their evening drink; and as they went the glorious flush of the setting sun streamed across the valley, flashed red on the far-off hills in the desert, and charged the soft mist-clouds round about with crimson. As the evening wind sang up over the hot rocks he breathed a sigh of intense relief, and stepped out from his retreat. Softly he went along the ledge, with his injured hand feeling the supporting wall on the left, and came to the "chimney," where he found the stone still in position. Lying down, with his head over the brink, he listened long for any sound that would tell of the presence of the enemy at the foot; but he could hear nothing but the booming of the Falls. Then he loosened a small flake of rock and let it slide. The metallic tinkle he heard distinctly, but no other sound,

and he sat up with a feeling of joy, to sit and wait for the coming of his friends, which he hoped would be soon.

The waiting was again long, but at last as he sat with his back against the wall and his feet touching the stone that blocked egress from the "chimney," he felt the covering-stone tremble. Quietly he raised himself to a kneeling position with a bit of deal wood in his hand. There was, he thought, the sound of heavy breathing coming quicker; then he heard his own name.

"Mark, are you there?"

He tapped on the stone. "Is that you, Amos?"

"The rheim, Mark! Throw it over."

The rheim was tied to a bit of dead wood. Mark flung the end over, took a turn of the slack round his wrist, and as the rheim tightened he pulled back. Amos swung up and over on his chest.

"We had better move the stone," said Mark, "so that the others can come up easily."

"Let it be. My tog, I am *altemaal gedaam* (regularly done);" and he went along the ledge, Mark following in silence, afraid to ask what had become of the others.

Amos blew on the coals, piled on little bits of reed till the flame caught, then put on more fuel. He was bare-footed, and only in his shirt—the costume he favoured when on serious spooring operations. He had no gun and no food.

"Where is the meal?" he said, looking round.

"Where is Dave?"

The restless brown eyes fell upon Mark's bound hand, then ranged over the floor.

"The red blanket has gone, also the meal-sack. There are blood-spots on the floor. Some one has been here—eh?"

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"Yes, the little people. But where is Dave?"

"The little brown man! And your finger, how came it hurt?"

"Is Dave a prisoner?" said Mark, white with anxiety.

"Dave is all right. Sixpence ook. So the men found out our hiding, eh? and there is no meal? That is bad, for I am hungry right through."

Mark related his experience, and Amos listened with half-closed eyes and his hands spread open to the fire.

"Dave should have stayed here with you. Thunder! Think what would have happened if you had not done as you did, and by myself I would have scouted better. See, Dave fired at a buck, and Stoffel's men, going to the wagon for food, heard. They came between us and the river, and, when dark came, we found they were on watch by the path leading this way. Dave was for fighting, but we talked it over long, and at last he, with Sixpence, went up the river to the spot where we landed from the tree. He had some plan in his head, but he would not tell me."

"And you?"

"Me? I came soft-footed through the place where the men watched. It took me long to travel ten yards, but somehow I slipped through."

"You got through unnoticed?"

"Ja. At one time I lay close to a Boer where he slept, for there was one man watching near. I could see the glow of his pipe. Oh, ay, it was hard, but I am glad I came, though there is no food."

"It was splendid!" said Mark, with feeling.

"I am not all bad—eh?" said Amos, a little fiercely; then his eyes rested on the bandaged hand. "And you,

kerel, have had much pain. Already you are older in the face, ja. Well, we will sleep. They can't climb up."

Mark sat a little while after Amos had rolled himself up, then he stretched himself on the rushes with a sigh of relief. The dull aching pain in his hand kept sleep from his heavy eyes, and as he stared at the fire he saw a little dark form bend over the coals for a moment, to reappear a little later with two other tiny creatures. Two, the mother and baby, curled up by the fire with their feet to the embers, and the other, with his bow, passed through in the direction of the "chimney," there, no doubt, to watch through the rest of the night. Mark smiled as he heard the contented "coo" of the baby Polly.

"Our luck is back," he thought, and then smiled again as he thought of their position, without food and without weapons.

When he stirred from his blanket at sunrise, he saw that the little people had gone, and that Amos also was about; but before he had time for anxiety the latter appeared along the ledge.

"Just been to see how things were. No one can climb up with that stone there, so we're safe from that quarter. I'll fill the kettle."

"The little people are over by the Falls, Si. Don't frighten them."

"Guess they'd more likely frighten me. Come on, and see if we can make friends."

The three were in their old position, and the woman at once edged away to the mist, but the man took the baby from her, and placed it on the rocks, falling back to his wife. Mark at once went forward, picked the child up, and sat it on his shoulder, where it grabbed his hair at

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once and drummed with its heels against his chest. Amos filled the kettle, and they both went back. When the fire was ablaze the man approached cautiously with his bow ready. Amos pointed to a seat near the fire, and the man at last sat down, with his knuckles on the ground in readiness for a spring. A beaker of coffee, however, calmed his nerves, and he squatted comfortably, running his eyes up and down over the two whites continually, and utterly indifferent to his wife, who edged up foot by foot, finally squatting timidly at the entrance. As they did not look at her, but played with the baby, whose skin was sadly wrinkled and rough, she crept up to the fire, and snatched the beaker from the hands of the man. They were a strange couple, with queer, wizened faces; miraculously thin in the limbs, and with the scars of old wounds on their bodies. All the time there was no change in their expression. They never smiled or looked pleased, but sat with restless, suspicious glances; yet there was gratitude in them, as had been witnessed on several occasions.

After sunrise they were prisoners in the shelter, for a cautious peep up at the overhanging rock revealed men in position. The Bushmen, with the improvidence of their tribe, had gorged the sack of meal the previous night, and there was nothing in the larder but half a tin of meat extract, and a little coffee and sugar. The baby had the soup, and the four others had to content themselves with coffee.

"Guess we'll have to eat that poultice," said Amos, indicating Mark's bandaged hand.

Mark smiled wearily. He stood in great need of a proper meal after his suffering. He searched his pockets for crumbs, and chewed a spoonful of coffee "grounds."

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They watched the march of the sun from the movement of the shadows and the strengthening of the heat, and they tossed uneasily through the night, to arrive at another morning with a feeling of faintness. Amos set his snares for the partridges before sunrise, but the birds did not seek the water until after the sun was up, and then the sentinels were at their post. A bird was snared. Peeping out, Amos saw it fluttering. He took another peep. One man was seated with his gun across his lap; another was lying full stretched, and the sun gleamed on the sloping barrel of the rifle.

He groaned and went white, made as if to dart out, and stopped. He looked at Mark, and his self-restraint gave way. He knelt down by Mark's side, looked into the blue eyes now so hollow and feverish.

"It is my fault that you came," he cried, "and you say nothing; but I will get you food."

"Don't," said Mark, slowly. "It doesn't matter; a little while—eh? and then peace."

The last word came in a whisper.

"Don't say that," said Amos, brokenly. "There is Dave."

"Good old Dave! I am glad he is not here."

Amos brushed his hand across his eyes and jumped up, but the little man was before him, jabbering excitedly and pointing up.

Following the direction, Amos looked up at the wall that rose sheer for a hundred feet or so to the lip of the river-bed above. At flood-time this part would also be covered with the waters leaping over, but now no water was coming over. Running his eye to the top he saw a solitary fig-tree growing apparently out of a little island

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right on the brink. The main river fell over to the left of this island, looking up; while to the right of the island the water, as they had noticed from the start, after sliding over, disappeared under the rocks. Amos could see nothing unfamiliar in the face of the cliff, but he turned to Mark; for the little man's excitement continued.

"Can you see anything, Mark?"

"Nothing! But I can't see very clearly."

"What in thunder are you jabbering about?" asked Amos, turning fiercely to the Bushman.

The man stooped and pointed, his eyes blazing.

"By the Lord," said Amos, with a gasp; "there's something moving. It's a snake! No, by jimminy, it's a bundle. See, Mark—see! It's Dave!"

The shout thrilled through Mark's tired nerves. He brightened up.

"Where? where?"

"Follow my finger. See that crack running across—just halfway across? Now look above. See it? There's a bundle or something."

"Yes, I see."

"Food, I guess; but how is he goin' to let it down?"

That was soon shown. The rope or rheim was pulled up a few feet, then let go with a jerk. This was repeated two or three times till at last the bundle broke away. Down it came, and, like an arrow, Amos dashed forward to prevent it from leaping over the wide ledge into the Fall. Mark glanced up to see if the Boers were watching. They were firing, but not at Amos, their attention being fixed on the little island which was on their level. One man, who looked like Van Snaar, was waving his hand, apparently to some people on the other side below the "chimney"

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signalling to them to go up to the top, for he kept pointing towards the island. Amos caught the bundle in his arms on the first hop, and came back at a run without drawing a shot. He had it open in no time, and all bent over with expectant grins.

“Meal,” said Amos, taking out a little bag and placing it for safety between his knees; “biltong,” and he cut off an inch for each, so that all jaws were presently at work; “mebos,” and a roll of pressed apricots joined the meal; “coffee, sugar, and your little medicine-box, Mark.”

“Good old Dave!” said Mark.

“We’ll have some ash-cookies,” said Amos; “and then I’ll fix up your finger, Mark, with some of that carbolic oil you’ve got in that chest of yours.”

CHAPTER XXVII

IN THE TRACK OF THE STORM

They fared pretty well, and then Amos acted as surgeon, while the Bushman looked on and grunted. The poultice had done its work well in drawing out all the bad matter, and when the wound was washed, anointed, and neatly bound, and the arm placed in a sling, Mark felt more at ease. They sat talking about Dave, wondering how he had reached the island, and hoping that he had escaped before the enemy from down water could reach the top to cut him off. As they talked Amos made himself a pair of canvas trousers and canvas shoes.

"'Spect he waded across," said Amos. "The river has been getting lower since we bin here."

The Bushman, who was squatting at the entrance overlooking the valley, pointed to the sky, and made a grunting noise in his throat. Then he spoke rapidly to his wife, who caught up the baby to her breast, and rocked it to and fro.

"It seems to be hotter than ever," said Mark. "Stifling!"

Amos looked up at the sky. "If it wasn't for the noise of the water, 'twould be as still as still. I've seen that kind o' sky before a storm of wind or hail often.

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Guess the sand columns 'll be dancing over the veld like big snakes rising up on their tails and twistin' round."

The Bushman moved about restlessly from one side to the other, now looking at the water, and now at the sky, while his wife followed him with her eyes.

"There's somethin' gwine to happen." He gave the plaintive call of the plover and the shrill alarm of the kingfisher. The Bushman clapped his hand to his mouth, then clicked and clacked with great energy. Next he pointed to the meal, the biltong, the tobacco, and a blanket, then to himself and his belongings, went a few paces out on the ledge, and came back.

"He wants us to give him some food," said Mark.

"Ja. But why?"

"Divide the stuff into shares, and let him have theirs."

"And then they will run?"

"I don't see how they can; but, even so, we don't want to keep them."

"There's somethin' gwine to happen," muttered Amos, looking up at the coppery sky. "But I s'pose you're right—and if we don't give, they'll take."

So he portioned out the rations, and handed a third share to the Bushman, together with the blanket and a strip of canvas.

Then something happened. With a vicious smack, and the scattering of fragments of lead and stone, a bullet struck near the fire, leaving a starred mark. They tumbled over each other in a scare, and then came a second whirr against the arch.

"Magtig!" cried Amos, "they're firing from the top, from the place where the bundle came from."

"Where Dave was? I hope he got away in time.

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Pile the rushes up in a wall right across. That will stop the fragments ;” and Mark with his foot kicked the rushes out, the rest helping him.

Then they crouched down behind, with a feeling of complete helplessness, as several other bullets splashed on the bed of the room under the arch. All of them were stung by the small fragments of lead, and the baby set up a loud cry. Of a sudden the firing ceased, but they waited for an hour or more before reconnoitring. On the “baboon’s head” there was now only one man, who was sitting smoking, with his hands folded, and a handkerchief under his hat to protect his head from the fierce rays of the sun, which radiated like steam from the rock. Then they went to the side facing the Falls, and saw a man standing with one arm clutching the tree on the island—Dave’s island. He held something up in the sun, then dropped it over. It dropped sheer, and bounded into a pool of water, where the partridges drank. The man waved his hand, and the other man on the rock stood up and walked away.

“It’s a plant,” said Amos. “That’s what.”

“I don’t think so,” said Mark, as he walked out, picked up the object, and returned in safety.

It proved to be a letter written on a scrap of paper and tied to a bit of dead wood. They let the paper dry in the sun, then Mark read it aloud. It was short and to the point.

“Be sensible. Your comrade Robey is a prisoner. Remove the rock above the crack in the cliff. You will gain nothing by holding out. You cannot escape, and if you are obstinate you must starve. To-morrow at noon I will be at the place. If the rock is removed, we will let

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bygones be bygones, and give you your share with the rest. If not, Robey will be sent over the Falls, and you may expect the worst. This is the most I can offer, and even so I have had great difficulty in securing these terms.

(Signed) "VAN SNAAR (FUTTER)."

Mark passed the paper to Amos, who made a pellet of it and flicked it away.

"He lies!"

"I am afraid it is true," said Mark, looking around. "We cannot expect to get any more food after this, and then, well——"

"Why should he write, then? Tell me that, Mark Clinton."

"I suppose because they are impatient." He paused to think. "He said something about a share—about a share. What does he mean by that, I wonder?"

"It means that the diamonds are somewhere over there, after all;" and Amos pointed across to the pit under the "baboon's head." "If he knows we must starve, why couldn't he wait—eh? The man lies."

"I don't care about the diamonds. It's Dave I'm thinking about."

Amos lifted his hand. "See here, Clinton. You know something of these men; tell me, would they share anything with you? If they find diamonds, would you have any? No, not by a mile. They'd send you and me after Dave, if they've got him."

"We cannot let Dave suffer for us. You know we cannot."

"But how do you know what that schelm says is true?"

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"We will tell your uncle to-morrow that, unless he shows Dave to us, we will not remove the rock. Will that satisfy you?"

Amos paused in thought. "They have not got Dave at all," he said, looking up. "'Cos why? If they caught him they would know that he had my gun—see? They'd know, too, that we had no weapons. Well, they would not waste words with us; they would build a ladder from the trees and climb up."

"Well, then, there can be no harm in our holding communication with your uncle to-morrow. I must be certain that Dave is not in danger."

"You will show yourself to him, and a man behind him, hidden from you, will shoot you through the head. My tog, they fired to kill us just now."

"Yes, and they let me recover the letter without firing at me."

"Well, we will see; but in dealing with these people, Clinton, you must be slim. You must say what you have to say in writing."

"We have no paper."

"A bit of stone will do and a burnt stick; then let it down with a bit of string. We will go slowly about this."

"Very well," said Mark. "I am only thinking of Dave, and if they do not show him to us uninjured, I would rather starve than give in."

"That's the talk," said Amos, fiercely. "But we won't starve, no; and we will get away. Ja. He says nix about Sixpence."

They sat down under the shelter to talk and talk over the matter, and at last Mark was persuaded almost that

Robey was not a prisoner. Then their attention went to the Bushman, to the strange oppression in the air, and to the unusual number of birds on the wing. The Bushman, squatting on his hams, pointed these out, as flock after flock pitched over the Falls, and swept down into the valley—ringed crows, vultures, and hawks. He pointed ahead, and made a booming noise. Amos watched the little man with interest, then he emitted the shrill scream of the sea-eagle, and the Bushman nodded his head violently.

“Somethin’s gwine to happen,” said Amos. “The birds fly to the sea—to the sands of the beach. Oh ay, there will be good picking on the beach when the tide has thrown up what the river brings down.”

“What do you mean, Si?”

“They fly to the sea, those eaters of carrion. That’s what the little man says. That’s what the still air means, and the haze across the sky.”

“But why now more than yesterday, or the day before?”

“I dunno; but the birds know. Oh ay, they know; and the little man knows. Maybe if I were on the veld away from the noise of the water, I could tell too what was comin’; but now I can feel it in my bones. Somethin’s gwine to happen!”

What it was that was “gwine to happen” Amos would not say; but when the night closed down, and strange lights flashed across the dark heavens, he kept muttering, while the Bushman grew more and more restless. The lights reminded Mark of the flash-lights of a man-of-war when the battleship itself was out of sight, and only the far-reaching pennons of light could be seen, coming and

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going, as if the monster were groping its way, and sending out feelers. They flickered and flashed, now low down on the horizon, now high up in the sky—pale, mysterious reflections, that lit up the darkness for a moment, and left it blacker.

“There is a storm somewhere,” said Mark.

“Oh ay. The yearth is listenin’ and waitin’, and all the insects, and birds, and animiles. Even the trees know what is comin’. Oh, ja, they know, for the wind goes whisperin’ among them.”

“A storm at sea, do you think?”

“It’s afar off, Clinton, maybe hundreds o’ miles; but we’ll know in the morning.”

The morning broke fair and fresh, with a spring in the air, a cloudless sky, and a new rainbow glittering in the spray with a brilliant arch.

They rose later than usual, having been long awake through the sultriness of the night; but the coffee was not ready, and the fire was not lit.

“They’ve bolted,” said Amos, laconically, “and taken their grub.”

Together, without another word, they ran to the “chimney,” and found the rheim dangling over.

“Thank goodness,” said Mark, “the woman and baby are safe, at any rate.”

“I knew somethin’ was gwine to happen,” muttered Amos, as Mark drew up the rheim.

They went back to the shelter thoughtful and silent; built up the fire, and ate their meal.

“It is curious that they went last night,” said Mark, “seeing that they could not have known Van Snaar’s intentions.”

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"Their goin' had nix to do with him, Clinton. The little people can see things that we can't, and they went 'cos of the signs in the sky."

"You've hinted a good deal, Amos; but you have not told me what you fear."

"'Cos I ain't certain; I'm only suspicious. From the signs I should say there would be a flood; and when the river comes down it carries all manner of things into the sea, and the sea clears itself of the rubbish, and tosses it all up, and the birds gather on the sands to feed. You saw the birds on the move seawards yesterday? Well, that's one sign; and another was the ghosts of lightnings comin' and goin' without a sound. The little people read the signs, and they went."

"There are no signs of a storm to-day."

"Maybe! If the river came down, Mark, where would we be?"

Mark looked at Amos, then rose to his feet and glanced about him.

"It has been over these rocks before."

"Ja, a many times—thunderin' down and over."

Mark sat down again, and felt the trembling of the solid rock beneath him with a new sensation.

"Between the starvation, your uncle, and the flood, we seem to be in a very tight fix," he said grimly.

"I'd be most afraid of Van Snaar," said Amos. "And," he added slowly, "I'd take my chance of flood and starvation. He killed my father."

"I would like to know about Dave," said Mark, wearily.

"For myself, I will have no truck with my uncle. With you it's different, and with Dave too. I think he

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lied about Dave ; but if Dave is a prisoner, make what plans you like, but leave me out. Give me one hour's notice, and if the flood doesn't catch us, I guess I can get clear, and join Sixpence. But you hear me : there's no good in my uncle. You might save Dave Robey to-day, to see him die to-morrow."

"You may be right," said Mark, quietly.

"Ja," said Amos, filling his pipe. "And now I want to know what he meant by 'going shares.'"

"I was turning that over in my mind last night," said Mark, as he neatly folded his blanket and placed it against the wall. "By Jove!" he said, stooping down, "here's the sign again. See, on the rock here ; drawn with a burnt stick."

Amos hurried forward, then went for a flaming stick, for the rock was in the shadow.

"A baboon's head!" shouted Mark.

"My tog, ja."

"And a line drawn from it to the ground. And look here!" Mark held up the same satin-coated, yellow-tinted diamond that he had last seen in the possession of the miserable Wicks. "The diamond!"

They passed it from hand to hand, with their eyes brightening.

"I have it," shouted Mark. "I see it all."

"Eh?"

"The pit, the round hole is the place of the diamonds. The baboon's head stands for the great rock over there ; and the Bushman has drawn the straight line down to where he placed the diamond. A line drawn down from the rock would end in the hole, and the hole——"

Amos moistened his lips. "The hole is where the

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diamonds are. So we were right at first. But we did not see any."

"Because we did not jump in and look for them."

"I guess we'll start acrost now."

"After I have found out the truth about Dave!"

"You ain't goin' to let that pack of thieves share in this?" said Amos with a scowl. "It's my secret, first of all. I saw the baboon's head first."

"And I found out the gallery under the falls. But don't let us quarrel. Your share will not be affected by any arrangement I may have to make."

Amos made a despairing gesture. "As sure as you're born, if you make a plan with that man, you'll lose. He'd kill you off for one diamond. It ain't right." He faced Mark with sudden passion. "Tell me this: Are you going to tell Van Snaar where the diamonds are?"

"No! They must find out where the place is themselves; but unless you prevent me, I would let them up, if it is to save Dave's life."

"But they'd kill you both when they had gained their point."

"I can't help that. My course is straight before me, whatever may be in their minds."

"But they ain't got Dave, I tell you!"

"In that case I won't let them up; you may be sure of that. I am going round now to the 'chimney,' and you'd better come too."

Amos was wild to go and search in the pit; but in the end he went after Mark, gathering as he went a few large round stones from the cracks in the rocks to use as missiles in case of necessity. When they reached the ledge over the "chimney" they stretched themselves flat and peered

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over cautiously. There was no one below, but, as they could see from the shadows, they were before the time appointed, and they waited. The hours dragged on, the sun grew vertical, and the shadows crept out on the left; yet no one came. Instead a string of duck swept overhead and sank like an arrow into the valley. Amos jumped to his feet, listening, with his mouth open.

"By the Lord!" he muttered, and stared at Mark, with the colour gone from his face.

"What is it, Si?"

"It's coming!" and with an effort he shook off his terror. "The diamond and the food! Quick! let us get them."

He darted back to the shelter, Mark after him, but as they gained the entrance they saw a huge dark body shoot out over the brink above, and as they darted in there was a sudden awful clamour in their ears, followed by a shattering blow on the arched roof, and then partial darkness, and next a dash of water against their faces. Almost instinctively they clutched at the parcel of food, at the sack which held the diamond, at a couple of blankets, and then they stood side by side against the rock, with their senses reeling under such an uproar as baffled description. The solid wall behind them shook and undulated, the rock beneath vibrated like the deck of a ship, and in the stifling air they were seized with a vertigo. They were no longer in an open arch, but in an hermetically sealed chamber, the side walls of which were rushing slopes of water, the near edges of which caught against the edges of the arch and filled the room with rain, which gathered inches deep on the floor and ran off along the darkened ledge in a stream. There was, after

the first shock, no light whatever, except at intervals. It was blacker than midnight, with occasional yellow gleams as the descending waters twisted away from the arch, leaving a slight gap for the light to strike through. By these brief glimpses they saw the rushes swept out on to the ledge, where they were suddenly whipped away.

Something had happened indeed. The river was down, brim-full from bank to bank, and the vast grey boulders piled one on top of the other, that for months had been without a drop of moisture, except such as came from the mist, were now under a mighty flood, straining for the valley beneath, into which it plunged with the roar of a hurricane, to thunder on in a riot of destruction to the sea, whose blue waters it would colour red for miles. And the sea would have none of the off-scourings. The first tide would roll back the litter with dull, sullen roars, the breakers being half smothered, and the second tide and the third would be at the cleansing work, until the sea had built up a rampart for miles along the beach—a rampart of reeds, and bush, and trees, with the decaying bodies of birds and animals. Then the tide would destroy this rampart of decaying matter, roll it out, beat it down flat, and spread the white sand above, so that within a month the beach would be again clean and level, with no sign of the *débris* vomited forth by the flood, except air-holes, showing that the sea-scavengers were at work below.

Once a boulder, hurtling from the height above, crashed on to the ledge and leapt out of sight, and another time a tree swept over the arch, its bark hanging in tatters, and several times they saw dimly the passing of animals which had been caught in the river-bed by the avalanches of water—tame creatures mostly, such as sheep and goats.

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But after a time they were dazed by the tremendous uproar, and, with arms linked, had but the instinct to shut their eyes and back against the rock. If they had shouted they could not have heard a word. Delirium must have seized them both in turn, for to both there came a horrible idea that they were slipping out to the ledge, where a great hand was ready to snatch and hurl them over. The idea also remained that they had been struggling with each other on the floor of the shelter.

Certain it was that it was only after many hours that they recovered their wits. It was daylight, and they were sitting down. The light streamed through the archway unbroken. They looked at each other, at their drawn faces, blue from cold, at the sodden blankets and parcel of food flattened out. Then they rose up, and holding each other, went out slowly into the sunlight. They sat down on the wet rock, and turned their faces to the sunshine, with their eyes shut. It was warmth they wanted, and by degrees the sunshine thawed them, sent the feeble blood running briskly once again to the brain-cells.

"Thank God it is over," said Mark, in a voice that was a hoarse whisper.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE PLACE OF DIAMONDS

Below for miles they could trace the yellow flood, alive with movement, as it boiled and tossed and leapt in its strength; then they turned their heads to look up at the Falls. Though the flood had abated so much that it no longer covered the rocks on their side, yet the Falls presented an appalling spectacle, covering the whole extent up to the "baboon's head" beyond, and leaping far out with a hissing sound that mingled with the roar of the blows upon the rocks below. Perpetually large boulders would spring out from the yellow waters, strike a rock, and then, in one gigantic bound, whirr like a thunderbolt into the depths.

"It's mornin'," said Amos, hoarsely—"mornin'! We been here all night."

It was so. The sun was mounting from the east.

"All night!" whispered Mark, with a shudder.

Amos struggled to his feet, looked at the Falls with a shrinking gaze, then turned to the left. Mark rose, and they crept round to the "chimney." The rock that closed the opening had been swept away, together with a large fragment of the "chimney" itself.

They scrambled down somehow, both rolling over at the bottom, gathered up their scattered things, and went

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off among the boulders, over masses of litter, to the dripping trees, passed through and out on to the dry veld, staggered into a donga. They scarcely knew what they were doing, feeling only a horror of the water and an overmastering influence to get away from its uproar. Almost mechanically they spread out their blankets to dry, got out of their clothes, opened the parcel of food, then settled on the warm ground and were asleep. They woke up once, moved by a common craving, and reached out for a bit of biltong, but though it seemed to them that there had been biltong when they first spread out the contents to dry, there was none now. They took a mouthful of sun-baked meal, and, getting into their dried clothes, went to sleep again. It was dark when they next woke, and there was an unmistakable smell of roasting venison in the air, savoury beyond anything they had ever smelt. They sat up and heard the peculiar spluttering of meat cooking on live coals. There was a fire, and forms seated by it, but they had eyes only for the meat, reaching out each for a steak with their fingers. Then they ate hungrily, and only when they had eaten did it occur to them that there were men there besides themselves—silent men, who had sat and smoked without a protest at this robbery of their meat. Mark peered at them without any feeling of uneasiness. He was indifferent to danger in whatever form it might come. The venison was good, and he wanted more. It was just as well to be courteous.

“How are you?” he said hoarsely, and then glanced critically at the fire.

“Nacht, hoe gaad it?” whispered Amos, turning a meaty bone over with a stick.

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"Magtig!" One of the men took his pipe out. "Wonderlyk—wonderful!"

"Excuse me, won't you? I am horribly hungry."

"Ja; I could eat a sheep."

They began again, and when they had finished the man held out a beaker of hot coffee, which the two sipped in turns with an indrawing of the breath.

"Alldewareld!" muttered the man who had exclaimed before.

"Dave!" shouted the two together; and they felt for his hands. "Dave! old Dave!"

Dave held them tight without speaking, while they laughed a wild croaking laugh with a touch of hysterics in it.

"Ja, my kleintjes," he said softly. "It is old Dave, and we are together. Sixpence sits there."

They shook hands with the Kaffir, whose eyes and teeth gleamed in the glow of the fire.

"Now, smoke a pipe, my kleintjes. Sit there an' smoke. You have been through trouble. Ja, I could see it when I came on you asleep, and thought you were dead." Dave's strong voice shook. "It is wonderlyk," he muttered again.

"Tell us all," said Mark with a sigh of intense gratitude.

"Ja, Dave, let us hear."

"Smoke—so; it will comfort you. What shall I say? It has been a time of great trial. What I could say could not tell what sorrow has been on me since the river came down like a wall, and you were underneath. It was hard, hard; and that night I sat with my head in my hands, caring nix, for I knew you were gone. In the morning I

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was there yet, afraid to come down nearer to look—sore afraid; but Sixpence made food, and in the afternoon I said to Sixpence, 'Let us follow the river even to the sea to find them, so that the wild things will not get at them.' We stood up, and to us came the little brown man. He raised a hand to us, and turned, keeping far away. In the end he led us here, and we saw you lying like the dead. The little brown man cried out as he has cried before, and went. But you were not dead. I leant over and heard your breathing, but my heart was sore because of the look in your faces. Tog, yes! And I went away into the bush, and after a time I shot a duiker. Sixpence skinned him, you have eaten of him, and it is well. That is all."

"The Tikoloshe is the friend of the chief," said Sixpence.

"Ja," said Amos, dryly; "he took our biltong."

"But, Dave, you have not told us how you escaped from the Boers."

"That is nix," said Dave. "Sleep now, you two, and in the morning we will speak further, for I have much to ask."

"First tell us where is Van Snaar."

"He and Stoffel and some others, I think, are on the far side of the river. They cannot cross over to-night—no, nor for a week. So sleep."

"Good old Dave!" whispered Mark, with his hand on the broad shoulder.

In the morning they talked. Dave heard how the two had passed a day and a night in the full track of the flood, and he in turn told them how he escaped from the little island before the Boers could cut him off.

"It was a little matter. After I let down the food to you I waded to the bank, the river on that side being low."

"But they fired at you."

"They were firing over the Falls, and it is hard so to shoot straight. Anyhow, we cleared off."

"And Van Snaar said you were a prisoner. Threatened that if we did not come to terms, you would be thrown over the Falls."

"He said so—eh? Well, I think they were in a bad way. They were quarrelling, I think, and so any trick was good enough for Van Snaar. Now they are worse off. Their camp was washed away, and those who were on this side went off to the wagon. Maybe they have had enough, and will trek. Now, what say? We can walk up to where the two oxen were left, find the food Mark hid, and then journey up till we come to the first dorp."

"As you like," said Amos, listlessly.

"Huis-to," cried Sixpence, in Kaffir, "to the thick milk and the sour beer. Huis-to! Where the girls call from the fields, and the calves call to their mothers. Yavuma!"

"So! we will go there. You are ready, Clinton?"

"After we have made another search for the diamonds. You see, Amos and I are agreed that we know the spot where we shall search, and we cannot go without making one effort, can we?"

"It is foolishness," said Dave. "We could get away easily now and you have one diamond. What say, Amos?"

"We came here to find diamonds," said Mark; "and you know very well you could not face Mr. Amner and

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say to him, 'I knew where the diamonds were, but was afraid to stay.' Nonsense! We will go back to the rocks and make one honest try."

They went back, climbed up the "chimney" once more, and spread their blankets in the archway. The river had shrunk so that the water no longer dashed against the great wall above the pit, but the bulk of water falling was about double what it was when they first crossed by the covered gallery. Mark decided that Dave should remain on guard, and that Sixpence should accompany him and Amos, carrying food in a bag made out of the skin of the duiker. This time they rubbed themselves well with fat, and rolled their clothes tightly in canvas.

They reached the pit with greater ease than on the former occasion, for the heavy curtain of water fell further away from the gallery, but they were dismayed to find that the hole was nearly filled with water and a thick yellow foam.

"It is no use," said Amos, sitting down at once. He was beaten, and without any interest left.

"The water is sinking," said Mark, after a long look. "This hole must communicate with the main stream. The water is draining away." He sat down on the brink of the hole, and watched the foam subside, till at last branches and reeds appeared. "To work," he said. "The sooner we finish, the sooner we get away. Buck up, Si! Here, Sixpence, hold the end of that rheim."

He swung down into the pit barefooted, with a rheim looped under his arms, but the footing was firm, and he threw the rheim up. "Make it fast somewhere, and let the end over. Now, both of you jump down."

They swung down, treading gingerly and looking up

fearfully, with thoughts of what would happen if the flood burst over in full force.

"We'll take the rubbish from the far side here and pile it over there, so that we can climb out easily."

They went to work, and as they warmed to it the interest in the search quickly exerted itself. First there was a deep layer of reeds and leaves and mud to remove, and after an hour's back-breaking work they came upon clean gravel, mixed with boulders and broken rock. Each took up a yard of gravel, and bent over as he scraped with a bit of stiff wood.

"Yavuma!" shouted Sixpence in the first five minutes. "Yavuma!" and he held up a glittering pebble, a straw-coloured diamond of about fifteen carats, as large as a runner bean.

Amos shouted and laughed.

"Good!" said Mark. "At it again. We've found them."

They went at it, bending, grubbing, and scooping with a fiery energy—and eyes that noted every pause on the part of one of the others. When they climbed out stiff in the back and dizzy from stooping, they had two diamonds to show—the one found by Sixpence, and a smaller one found by Amos. They ate a little, and passed the night in an angle of the rock after signalling across to Dave. At daybreak they were at the work again, going at it more systematically. In the morning they found five, all small, and in the afternoon three, the largest running to about six carat.

"If we only had a sifter!" cried Amos, at intervals.

As it was, they sorted the gravel with their hands, and the friction in time wore the skin off. Again they passed

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the night on the rock, and then jumped into the pit for what they tacitly agreed was the last time. They were nearly exhausted. Another day, and they would be too weak to climb out; for under the sun's heat the mass of rubbish was throwing off a sickly, fever-breeding smell. They came at last to bed-rock, found that the bottom shelved down, and in shifting a boulder, Mark's foot went right through a fissure. As he withdrew it the gravel rolled down and through in a continual stream, until Amos plugged the hole with a bundle of reeds. Then they set to work on the other side, but with waning strength.

"Enough!" said Mark. "We must get back while we have strength."

He followed last, and in his last look around saw a pin's point glittering from a pebble. He picked it up. The point was the point of a diamond. He tapped the pebble with a stone, cracked it and peeled off a husk that enclosed a diamond as the almond-shell encloses the kernel. It was a beauty, as it drank in the light of day for the first time, and gave it back in a sparkle. He put it in his mouth and climbed up.

"Look!" he said, and dropped it into the palm of his hand, where it sparkled, pure white, a gem of "first water," and as large as a thrush's egg.

The beauty of the stone revived their spirits. They had not, after all, come so far in vain, and when they returned to Dave they were ready to follow his advice for an immediate start.

Two days later they reached the laagte where Mark and Dave had left the two oxen. The place was one mass of yellow mud without a mouthful of food; but the two

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big patient beasts had been reluctant to leave the place, and Dave found them lying down among the rocks on the hill. They loved a welcome, and stood sniffing at him while he rubbed their foreheads. Mark had some difficulty in locating his cache, but when he did, he found the precious bundle undisturbed.

CHAPTER XXIX

RED STOFFEL'S LAST BLOW

As they sat about the camp-fire that night, having made a good march to widen the distance between them and the Falls, there came out of the darkness a little figure, which held out its tiny arms and tottered with uncertain steps.

"It's the blessed kid," said Dave, hoisting it up on the wide flat of his hand and popping a roast rib into its hands.

Amos looked around into the shadows, and gave the call of the young partridge for its parents. Out of the dark there came the answering call, and another figure advanced and squatted, and another who squatted further out.

Meat was handed out and taken.

"We must do something for these people," said Mark. "If it had not been for the little man, Amos, Dave would not have found us."

"And we should not have had any diamonds."

"True, we must do something," said Dave. "We will sleep over it, and if they are here in the morning we will see what can be done." He took care to keep the baby under his blanket, however, and in the morning the two parents were there, though the woman sat some distance off.

"I should like very much to know how the little man knew of the diamonds, and whether he has met your uncle before."

"That was also in my mind, Clinton," said Amos. "If he knew my uncle, he must have known my father. I will try him with my father's whistle that he used to call up a Kaffir." He began to whistle softly, imitating the warble of the "black-head," then he sounded the loud clear note of the golden oriole, with a peculiar quaver at the end.

The effect on the Bushman was instant. Leaping to his feet, he stood stooping forward, with his eyes fixed on Amos, who unfastened the little skin bag he always wore round his neck—the bag taken from his father, with the shell of the diamond in it—and threw it towards the little man. The Bushman pounced on it, smelt it, thrust his hand in and drew out the carbon shell. Then he talked excitedly, pointing to the shell, then to the baby, then to Amos.

"What does he mean?" said Mark.

Amos, very still and white, took from his belt the diamond that had been about the baby's neck. The Bushman ran forward, and, taking the stone, fitted it into the shell. Then he gave it back, went down, lifted the white boy's foot, and placed it on his head.

"You see," said Amos with a gesture.

"He knew your father," said Mark. "He took the diamond from your father's bag. Is it possible that he——?"

"No," said Amos, "he did not kill my father. He would have run at my father's whistle. But how can I find out?"

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They stood staring from one to the other, then Mark uttered an exclamation and looked about. There was a large, smooth rock near. He picked up a burnt stick and ran to it. The others looked over his shoulder. On the surface he drew a rough sketch of a wagon, the outlines of hills, a bush and a few anthills, and in the foreground the figure of a tall man carrying a gun. Then he pointed to the bag, and drew a bag hanging from the man's neck. The Bushman watched the design with little glittering eyes, and no sooner had Mark finished than with a little stick of red substance he drew the figure of two men—one a white man, also with a gun, and the other a small nude figure. He pointed at it, then rubbed out the little figure, and made a little face looking round an ant-hill.

"He means he was hiding," muttered Dave.

Then he rubbed out the figure Mark had drawn, and replaced it by one of a man lying flat, while from the other man's gun he drew a curl of smoke.

"Oh yes," said Dave. "That one fired."

Again the artist worked, and this time the little figure was running towards the fallen man. Then he took the bag from Amos, put it on the ground, went off a little way and turned, sprang forward, seized the diamond, and ran, then came back glancing from one face to the other in fierce expectation, restoring the bag and diamond to Amos.

"It is very plain, and very awful!" said Mark.

Amos sobbed—a dry sob.

The Bushman drew the little man tied to the wagon-wheel, and then pointed to his back, which was one mass of scars.

"They tied him up and sjamboked him," said Dave,

"because he would not tell where the diamond was. Most likely left him for dead. But who did it?"

"My uncle," said Amos, and he picked up a rifle.

"Where are you going?"

"After him," said Amos, passionately.

"Not that way, Si. Your father would not wish it. The man suffers. Let him suffer for his crime; but do not act as he did."

"Clinton speaks well," said Dave, gravely. "Do not go out to kill a man. Let him be. For what he has done he will suffer."

"But he shot my father!"

"Your father, as I have heard, Si, was a brave man, and just. He was kind to the little ones. Even the Bushmen loved him, as you may see."

Amos flung himself on the ground, and covered his face.

"It is well," said Dave. Then he took the belly-band of canvas and fastened it round the tamest of the two oxen, placed the baby in one large side-bag and a little food in the other. He looped a rheim round the horns, and gave the end to the Bushman. Then he looped a rheim round the horns of the other, and led it out to where the woman stood. She waited for him without fear, for in his face there was the look of a man who wins confidence from dumb animals. She took the rheim, and he waved his hands into the waste.

They went down into the river in haste, as if fearful that the oxen would be taken from them.

The oxen looked back and lowed.

"Hambaka!" said Dave, "trek!"

And they splashed in. At the top of the ridge beyond

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the mother climbed to the back of one, and the father on the other. Then they disappeared; and Mark shook Dave's hand.

"My last two," said the big man, "and the best of the span."

"It was a great gift to make, Dave, but they deserved it."

"Ja. And now let us go. Come, Si, my son; we are going home now—home, Si, to the bee-trees and the shady kloofs. The little brown man is riding easy on the near achter-oss, and the mother and kid are on the vaal pense. They are happy."

"I am glad you let them have the oxen," said Amos, dully.

"Home, lad, home!" said Dave, heartily. And with his hand on Si's shoulder he struck out up the river.

Amos was silent and sombre; but Mark talked of their plans, to take the boy's thoughts away from his father.

They had not, however, left the trouble behind, for in the afternoon they came on a solitary man, limping painfully, barefooted, and with a handkerchief bound over his head. He looked round, and waited for them, leaning on a stick.

"Daag, oom!" said Dave, after a steady look at the forlorn figure.

"Daag, neef!" he said.

It was Rooi Stoffel. Ragged and footsore, with fallen cheeks, the man carried himself with an iron composure that was the stamp of the guerilla chief.

"So?" he said, "Van Snaar has not caught you! He is no good at this work. Myself, I would have strung you up, but he works like a mole."

"You are not well off yourself, oem."

"Another man would have died, but not Rooi Stoffel. See, what is this?" and he pointed to a wound in his arm. "This was Van Snaar. He fired at me when the flood had me by the legs, and my hands were on a branch. There was a sick man in the scherm, and I tried to carry him when I heard the roar of the flood. I lifted him up, ja, and they caught him; then the flood took me by the legs, see you, as I held to a tree-branch. So he fired at me, and the bullet went through my arm."

"The brute!" said Mark, in hot disgust.

Stoffel turned his tired red eyes on the young Englishman.

"Englander, you were near death that night. How came you to get away? But no matter. Another man would have fallen from the tree, but not Stoffel. Mij Gott! no. I hung on, and when the others had gone I crawled up. Since then I have followed him."

"Where is he?" asked Amos.

"You would like to know—eh, neef?" and the man looked slowly at Amos. "Maybe he has done you a wrong."

"He killed my father—murdered him, and they were friends, brothers by marriage."

"So?" Stoffel laughed. "Then I won't say, neef. I want to find him for myself."

"You think we will not punish you after the trouble you have caused?" said Dave.

"As you will—what you will."

Mark cut off a bit of biltong, and Dave a stick of tobacco.

"Is there more we can do for you?" asked Mark.

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"Niets, Englander."

They went on, dropping him behind; but until sunset they saw him coming slowly on. They made their camp well away from the river, for, weak as he was, Stoffel was not the man they would like to see by the fire. Mark and Dave talked of their plans over their pipes to cheer Amos, whose mind was too much on that dark tragedy, and they took out the diamonds to guess at their value. They closed their eyes only when they saw that Amos was asleep, and in the night they heard nothing. But in the morning after they woke there was in the eyes of each a great unspeakable terror. They ate their breakfast in silence, looking at each other with haggard glances, then, with a choke, Amos said he had lost his diamonds.

"And I mine!" shouted Mark.

"Thank the Lord!" muttered Dave, wiping his brow. "Mine are gone too. I thought—but no matter now."

Amos leapt at the Kaffir. "Where have you put them?"

"Yoh!" cried Sixpence.

Dave pulled Si off, and pointed to the ground, where he had just seen the imprint of a toe.

"It's Stoffel!" yelled Amos. "It was a lie he told us! and he and Van Snaar are working together!"

"Thank the Lord, he had no weapon!" muttered Dave.

Amos pulled himself together. "Keep behind me," he said, and stood moving his head to take in the lay of the land. "The wind was from the east last night, Dave?" he asked sharply.

"Ja, from the east. I know from the way the tobacco-smoke went."

"Then they crept up to us against the wind," said the

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other; and with another look he walked straight to a bush. "There were two," he said. "One wore boots. That is good." From the bush he went slowly in and out the thorn-trees, and he pointed to a broken wacht-en-beetje thorn. "They went quickly," he said quietly, "going anyhow. By-and-by we will come to where they stopped." They went on, the three following, only one of whom—the Kaffir—could see the signs. His wide nostrils were quivering, and his eyes ranged from his master over the veld.

"Here they stopped;" and Amos pointed to a rock. "Stoffel sat there; here is a bit of rag from his foot. He wore such a bit on his right foot."

They looked at the torn piece of soiled rag, and followed on.

"They went on slowly; there is a shorter distance in the stride."

"I can see no marks."

"No, it is all blank," said Dave; "but surely they went this way."

"It is plain," said Amos, in curiously calm tones, as if he were detached from himself. "There is a nail in one boot-heel. It is easy to see once you have got it well in your eye." He led on, now quickly, now slowly, until they came to a donga, where the footprints were plainly seen. "Van Snaar walked behind—see? and Stoffel did not like it."

"Stuff, man!" exclaimed Mark.

"Ja, it was so. See the naked spoor. It is turned sideways. Stoffel stood to look back at Van Snaar."

"My tog!" muttered Dave; "he is a devil, that uncle of yours. Why did he wait behind?"

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They climbed out of the donga to the top, where Sixpence with a yell ran forward to a low bush.

"Congela!" he cried, pointing at the ground, his teeth showing in a snarl.

They saw. It was the man with the bare feet, dead and stark, with a dark stain on his torn shirt; but it was not Stoffel.

"Brent!" said Amos, in a whisper, and turning faint from the shock of a surprise. Stoffel it was he expected to see.

"Brent! ay, it is he." Dave stooped over, examined the body, felt the pockets. "The diamonds are gone."

"Let us go," said Amos, thickly, "or he will do more mischief that—that——"

"Wait," urged Mark, and with Dave's assistance he covered the poor body from the sun and the wild beasts. Then they went on with stern eyes and grim mouths.

"Before night he must die," whispered Amos.

"Ay!" they answered.

But the man was dead when they found him late in the afternoon, and another avenger had forestalled their vengeance.

"Kerels!"

The hard voice they had heard often before brought them to a halt near a vlei, and from the dead grass they saw an arm lifted.

"You follow dead spoor, neefs!" cried the voice.

It was Stoffel, lying near a little hole of muddy water, and bleeding to death.

"He lies there by that thorn-tree, dead." He rose up and pointed. They looked, then watched him sink down.

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"And you?" said Mark, kneeling down beside the Boer.

"I am just dead, Englander. There are your diamonds;" and he pointed at his pouch.

"You would like better to take them from me than from him,"

Mark dipped his cap in the water and held it to the dry lips.

"Danke, neef. You were near dead that night. But see here. I meant to cut you loose. You may think I lie, but it was so."

"I believe you, mynheer."

"Well, what matters? Take the diamonds. Take them!"

He stared up at Mark with a queer, defiant light in his deep-set eyes, as Clinton opened the parcel.

"There is a klein Stoffel lives there over in Victoria West. He learns the English books. If it seems to you good, you will send him a little diamond from his father. He would like it."

"I will 'oom."

"And I ook," said Dave.

"Me, too," said Amos, bringing his eyes away from the thorn-tree.

"A little water! A man like me dies hard."

He drank eagerly. Then his face grew hard, and his brows frowned. "An eye for an eye," he said in English; "a tooth for a tooth. That was Rooi Stoffel's way," and Rooi Stoffel's soul passed.

* * * * *

A month later the wanderers were back in the peaceful lowlands of the fruit country. After they had divided up

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into six shares of £4000, there remained £700 over. Of this £350 went to the klein Stoffel, and the balance to Sixpence, who took to himself Nosanna, and bought many cows. Mark sent a third share of his to his parents, and banked the rest.

"You will want to set up for yourself?" said Mr. Amner.

"After I have served my time with you—if you will keep me."

"My dear lad, I would like you to stay just as long as you like. But there are five hundred acres I could let you have at a price, and while you remain you can plant them out, and build your house."

"That is splendid of you."

"Selfishness, lad, that's all."

Dave was delighted to hear of this. "Some day," he said, "I will settle near you."

"Why not now?"

Dave took his pipe from his mouth, sighed, and put it back.

"There is Amos," he said presently.

"Well?"

"Ja. I say there is Amos."

"Of course. What do you mean?"

Dave looked at his pipe and shook his head.

Amos was sitting outside, gazing listlessly at nothing. Presently he joined the others, and stared at them, with his hands in his pockets.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I dunno." He sat heavily down, and stared at the ground. "It's this way. I ain't feeling like I did. When I had no money I wanted to marry and settle down. Now I don't."

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“Phew!” whistled Mark.

Dave brightened up, and Amos looked at him sourly.

“I want to go away, bee-hunting. That’s what.”

“Then why in thunder don’t you go?”

Amos leant forward. “I don’t understand girls. There was a girl who seemed to think I was somebody, now she is just perlite, that’s all. And what licks me is that I don’t care. Now, why don’t I care?”

“’Cos you’ve got more sense,” said Dave, cheerfully. “With me it’s different. Onct I could not look at a girl; now—well, now it’s different.”

Amos straightened up. “By gum!” he said, and stared at Dave. “I guess I’ll take a fortnight in the bush. Just lose myself. There’s a little black chap who’s real smart. I’ll take him.”

He slipped out, and by-and-by Dave went. He was away a long time, and when he returned he fidgeted.

“I don’t know that I won’t stay, Mark.”

“I’m very glad, Dave.”

“Yes; you see, I been speaking to her; and she says she’d like a house over there, above your dam.”

“Her! Who do you mean?”

Dave blushed, fairly blushed. “Miss Amner.”

“You old humbug! Does Amos know?”

Dave nodded his head. “Well, it’s this way. Amos allowed to me it was brother and sister with him and her. That’s what he told me. Says he found that out first day we came. ’Twas on account of you.”

“What had I to do with the change?”

“She sets so much store by you; and you pitched in such a tale about my doings that she seemed to think I were a sort of martyr or something.”

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"Hero, perhaps?"

"Now you're laughing; but Amos, he talked—and, well, I just went up to her. What was in my mind to say was this—that Amos was young, and would get sense."

"I hope you did not."

"No," said Dave, simply. "It all went when I stood by her. I was dumb for a time, and when I spoke, Mark, it were about how I shot my brother. Poor old Amos! Maybe——"

"Yes."

"Maybe you won't mind going over to cheer him up. He's in the shed over there. If you'll excuse me, I'll go and get an orange."

"You old humbug!" said Mark, laughing. "Just as if I didn't see a white dress among the orange trees."

He went over to the shed to comfort Amos; but Amos was bearing up well. He was oiling his new gun in the presence of a little Kaffir boy, who stood with admiring looks.

"Halloa, Clinton. There is my new boy—brother o' Sixpence. I call him Threepenny-bit—'Tickey' for short. He's goin' with me. Say, I year'd the ghon-ya calling just now."

"Where are you going, Si?"

"Way through the Kowie Bush over to the Kareiga, and maybe on to the Addo, after elephant."

"I am sorry I can't go."

"Oh ay; but you ain't lost sight of me, Mark. I'll be back, I guess. I want to learn more from you, kerel."

"Learn from me?"

"That's what. There's things I know and there's things you know. But it's not what you *know*, Clinton;

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it's what you do—see?" He squinted down the barrels. "If a fellow shows me the right thing to do, maybe I'll do it; but with you—you know."

"Oh, come! you're pulling my leg."

"I guess the best thing that ever happened to Si Amos was when Mark Clinton took him by the hand." Amos nodded his head gravely; then from his lips there broke the clear triumphal notes of the thrush.

THE END

