# *Aletta*

## *A Tale of the Boer Invasion*

*By*

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Freeditorial

# ALETTA

## Chapter One
## The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast

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

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

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

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

The delegate from Pretoria was in full blast. The meeting, which had opened with long prayer by the predikant and a long speech of introduction and welcome from Swaart Jan

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

"Brothers," he went on. "Brothers—and sons—for many are here to-night who are the men of the future—the men of the very near future—to whom the one long life-struggle of their fathers in days of old is but a name; to whom, however, the righting of the wrongs of their fathers is bequeathed; to whom life—yea, even life itself, has been given and allowed by the Lord above that they may carry out the solemn bequest of righteous vengeance which their fathers have handed down to them; that they may have ever before them, ever in their thoughts, the deliverance of this their dear land, their splendid fatherland, from the hated English yoke. You then—you younger men especially—stand up day by day and bless God for the noble privilege which is yours, the privilege of the patriot, of the man who sacrifices all, worldly possessions, even life itself, for the sake of his beloved fatherland. Not many days since I stood upon that spot, that holy ground, where five of your fathers were cruelly done to death for no other crime than repudiating the rule of a bloody-minded king, an English king who was not their king, whose sovereignty they had never owned. There they were hung up to the infamous gallows where they died the most ignominious of deaths, with every circumstance of barbarity which could have been practised by the savage heathen against whom they have ever striven. Standing upon that spot I could see the whole of it again. I could see those five men hauled beneath the English gallows-tree, I could see the brave and noble fortitude wherewith they went to their death. I could see the weeping crowd of their fellow-countrymen—of Our fellow-countrymen—and women—gathered to witness their sufferings. And the five patriots—the five martyrs—were dragged up by ropes to their doom. But, brothers, God intervened. Heaven intervened. Even as the lions' mouths were shut to Daniel—as the fiery furnace kindled by the idolatrous king passed over the three servants of God unhurt—even so Heaven intervened to render the slaughter instruments of the cruel English king of no effect. The apparatus of death gave way, and the five patriot martyrs fell to the earth unharmed. What then? What then, sons and descendants of those great ones? Did the English recognise the hand of God? Did they recognise that even their puny mockery of justice had to bow before the manifestation of His will? They did not. In the face of the tears and supplications and bitter grief of those who beheld; of those in whose veins ran the blood of the martyred men, those five patriots were once more put through the bitterness of death. This time Heaven did not intervene. And why? In order that the

death agonies of those tortured patriots should be held in remembrance; that they should be ever before the eyes of their descendants as an earnest of the death agonies of the hated and hateful race which was their oppressor and is ours. Brothers, I stood upon that ground, that very spot, that holy ground, and I prayed and gained strength that I might fulfil the purpose for which I am here. Slagter's Nek! The infamous name which was given to that holy spot has gone down to generations in its infamy, and ever will. Is there here a Bezuidenhout, is there a Meyer, is there a Faber, is there a Snyman—yea, and I could name a score of others, a hundred others, a thousand others—in the veins of whom runs the blood of the patriot martyrs? Let them not forget the English butchery of Slagter's Nek; then, when their rifles are pointing straight, let their watchword be 'Slagter's Nek'!"

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

The orator proceeded. He drew vivid pictures of the exodus of the original Dutch settlers, sacrificing all to be free from the hated English rule; of their intrepid and simple and God-fearing lives; of their daily hardships and toil; of their peril at the hands of fierce and warlike tribes; and while setting forth their endurance and heroism, he never wandered far from the main point, the text of his whole discourse—viz. how all that their fathers, the old Voortrekkers, had to endure was the outcome of the oppressive rapacity of the English yoke. The myrmidons of England would not leave them in peace and quietness even when they had avenged the bloodshed and treachery of the Zulu despot, and had reason to believe they had at last found the land of promise. Let them look at Natal to-day. They, the Dutch, had bought it from Dingane, and had occupied it. But the English had come and had seized it from them, had robbed them of the fruit of their labours and of their toil, and of their outpoured blood. Let them look at the Transvaal of to-day. It was the same there. A horde of English bloodsuckers had poured in, fevered by the lust of gold, and still more and more, until the land was overrun by them, as the land of Pharaoh under the plague of locusts. And not only that, but they had brought with them every life and soul destroying vice which Satan and his hell-kingdom, Europe, could bring to bear to contaminate and utterly corrupt a God-fearing people.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again a shout of acclamation greeted the words.

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

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

When the singing and cheering had subsided the emissary invited any of those present to express their opinions, but few cared to do so. One or two of the old men got up, but their remarks were mere quavering comments—interspersed with pious aspirations—

upon all that the speaker had said, and fell woefully flat after the fiery periods and power of eloquence of the delegate from Pretoria. And the secret of that power lay in the fact that the man was so terribly in earnest. No timeserving, self-seeking stump-agitator was Andries Botma. Every word he uttered he implicitly believed, and that the whole Dutch race in South Africa were under special Divine protection, and the Anglo-Saxon under the Divine curse, he no more doubted than that the sky was above and the earth beneath. Though a hopelessly fanatical patriot, he was essentially an honest one, and this his hearers knew.

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

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

"What is coming now?" she repeated shortly—a way she had with those of the speaker's age and type.

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

The old lady snorted.

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

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

"Ja, Ja, Theunis, that is just what the Patriot said," they chorussed. But the young fellow looked sulky—very much so. He was one of that type of young Boer who no longer thinks it the mark of a man and a patriot to sleep in his clothes and wear his hat in the house.

Nor was he the only one of that type there present. Others took his side, and hurled corresponding gibes at the conservative party, and the uproar became simply deafening, all talking and bellowing at once.

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

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

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

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

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

"No!"

"Why is he not here to-night?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Two.

## Sidelights.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Only some Dutchman, I suppose."

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

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

"Why, May, this is good of you," he says, as he joins her. Seen dismounted he is a tall, well-set-up man of about five-and-thirty, with clean-cut features and a dark moustache. His brown eyes are clear and searching, and there is a certain quickness about his speech and movements which is totally disassociated with any suggestion of flurry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No dogs heralded their approach with loud-mouthed clamour. No self-respecting dog given to erratic movement, and poking his nose into every corner where he should not, could live a day on a well-organised ostrich farm by reason of the poisoned morsels—carefully planted out of the way of the birds themselves—wherewith the run is strewn; for the benefit of cats and jackals, and leopards. One ancient and wheezy cur, however,

incapable of any lengthier peregrination than a hundred yards, greeted their approach with sepulchral barks, and behind it came the owner, with his coat half on half off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re not going on to-night?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Three.

## A Boer Farm.

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

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

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

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

Stephanus De la Rey was seated on his stoep, smoking a meditative pipe and thinking deeply. He had just been reading the newspapers, and there was enough in them at that time to give a thoughtful man plenty to think about. His own sympathies were not unnaturally with the Transvaal, where two of his sons had settled, and for its President he entertained a very warm admiration. But he was no fiery patriot. War was a terrible thing, and war between two white nations—two Christian nations, in a land swarming

with heathen barbarians—seemed to him hardly justifiable under any circumstances whatever. Even if the worst came to the worst, let the Republic fight its own battles. He and his neighbours had no grievance against the English Government under which they dwelt—save grievances which were purely sentimental and belonging to ancient history; and as he gazed around upon his own prosperous lands the gravity of his thoughts deepened. This was momentarily diverted by the approach of two of his sons—who had just come in from the veldt—tall, light-haired, quiet-looking youths of two- and three-and-twenty respectively. They seemed to be under the influence of some unwonted excitement.

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

"I cannot guess. Who is it?"

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

Both looked furtively at each other and then at their father. The latter did not seem overjoyed at the news. In point of fact he was not. Personally the presence in his house of the Transvaal delegate would have afforded him the keenest gratification but that he knew as surely as though he had been told that the latter's visit would be purely of a political nature, and Stephanus De la Rey preferred to leave politics severely alone. Not only that, but that his own conversion to the ranks of the secret agitators was the motive of the visit he more than suspected.

"Where did you hear that, Jan?" he said.

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

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, Jan, to stand there before me and talk such wicked nonsense? Is that the sort of Christianity the teaching of Mynheer, as well as of your own parents, has implanted in you, that you can talk about shooting men—Christian men like

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it?"

"Where?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So?”

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

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

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

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

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

“There would be every excuse, wouldn’t there?” he answered, entering into the joke, and, moreover, hugely amused, remembering that almost the last words May had

spoken to him had been to chaff him about these very girls, and now almost their first words had been to chaff him about her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come, then,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So?”

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

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

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

## Chapter Four.

## The Conversion of Stephanus De La Rey.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not much was said during the evening meal, and that little was mainly confined to local and farming matters and the prospects or the reverse of a speedy rain. The Boer guests fell to with a will, and did ample justice to the springbuck stew and other delicacies of

the veldt as there set forth in abundance; for Mrs De la Rey had anticipated just such an inroad as had taken place. Moreover, she was a model housewife, and possessed of wonderful Dutch recipes of old-time Cape and Batavian origin, and within her domain here were none of the insipid and over-sweetened dishes which prevailed in the ordinary and rougher class of Boer household. After supper—when pipes were in full blast, in such wise, indeed, that it was hardly possible to see across the room—it was not long before the subject engrossing all minds came to the fore.

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

"Rather, Marthinus. Why not?"

"Why, because you're an Englishman, to be sure."

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

There was a great laugh at this, and Barend Van Zyl aforesaid made believe to withhold the decanter on the ground that its contents might impair the speaker's patriotism. It led to a lot of chaff with regard to the political situation, some of which, albeit good-humoured, was keen enough to have thrown some Englishmen, Frank Wenlock, for instance, into a real fighting rage. This one, however, was made of different stuff. It didn't ruffle him in the least. Moreover, he knew that they were merely "taking the measure of his foot."

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

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

"Hallo, Marthinus, that's a little too loud," cut in Colvin Kershaw with a laugh. "Why, man, how about that old springbuck ram I saw you miss twice running that shoot we had at Tafelfontein at the end of last season there, oerkant, by the vlei? He wasn't a step

over four hundred yards. Come now, what would you do with your runaway man at five hundred?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The above conversation, however, was significant of two things. One was the high-pitched tension to which racial feeling had attained among the northern border Dutch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

came into the land to enrich themselves, certainly not to enrich our land. But now that it is rich they want to seize it."

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

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

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

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

with a whole-souled elation. He knew he had won, and that however much time and thought he might give to the situation between this and then, the moment the forces of the allied Republics crossed the border Stephanus De la Rey would be upon their side.

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

## Chapter Five.

## Signs.

“Jij verdomde Engelschman! Stil maar! Ik saal nit nou jou kop afslaan!” (Note 1.)

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

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

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay!
Oom Paul op een vark gerij,
Af hij val en zier gekrij,
Toen klim op en veg gerij.”
With a growl and a curse the big Boer comes at him. He is nearly a head the taller and far the heavier and more powerful man; but Frank Wenlock knows how to use his hands a bit, and, “sprung” as he is, he parries the sledge-hammer blow aimed at him by his large assailant, and stands ready. The latter begins to parley:

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

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

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

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

“Ta-ra-ra-ra Boom-de-ay,
Oom Paul op een vark gerij—”
he begins again in a tone that is insulting and defiant to the last degree.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not one bally second,” replied Frank briskly.

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

The speaker was on tenterhooks, for he knew by experience what a difficult customer Frank Wenlock was to manage on the few occasions when he had had a drop too much. The chances that he would become obstreperous and provoke a general row or not were

about even. But either the moral influence of his mentor was paramount, or some glimmer of the logical faculty had worked its way into Frank's thoughtless but good-natured mind, and he was amenable.

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

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

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

"Ja, wait a bit!" he growled, half aloud. "Wait a bit, friend Wenlock! If I don't put a bullet through you before this year is dead, I'll—I'll become an Englishman."

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

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

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

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

"I don't. But you will get liquoring up with every man Jack who speaks to you."

"Well, but—you can't refuse. And then you only go in there once in a blue moon. Surely one can have a bit of a spree."

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

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

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

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

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

“No. Let go at them from the cart.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The effect of the name was magical.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Haven't got anything to say. I'm tired. I prefer to look at you instead."

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

"And of me?"

"You know I am not."

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

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

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

Note 2.

“Oom Paul is riding on a pig—
He falls off and hurts himself,
Then climbs up and rides away—”
A nonsensical bit of popular doggerel. In Dutch it makes a jingling rhyme.

## Chapter Six.

## Colvin makes a Discovery.

“Gert.”

“Baas?”

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

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

“Did you hear what I said, Gert?”

“Ja, sir.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What am I to ride, sir?”

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

“I would like to go with Baas.”

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

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

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

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

Propinquity—that is, opportunity—has much to answer for. They had been thrown together a great deal, for have we not said that he had spent some time with the Wenlocks while looking about for a farm of his own? Moreover, he had come there handicapped by a kind of spurious heroic glamour, in that he was supposed to have saved Frank’s life on one occasion in the Matopo Hills, what time they were hotly pressed by the Matabele, and that rash youth had chosen to hang back when he should have been retiring with the column. He had collected half a dozen volunteers and brought him out just in time. To his own mind it had been all in the day’s work, but others had seen fit to make a great deal more of it than it seemed to deserve. Of course the girl had begun by making a sort of hero of him. Again, he himself personally was the kind of man that women take to—cultured, travelled, well-bred, and full of savoir vivre. It would have been strange if, considering the life the girl led, the few men she saw, of her own nationality at least—for although several of the young Dutch men around were

both well-looking and well educated, she could not take to them—she should come to think a great deal of her brother's friend, and their only English neighbour. Hence the intimacy that had grown and ripened between them.

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

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

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

or under any circumstances, in the De la Rey girls for instance, or in any member of that family. And yet Stephanus de la Rey was “only a Boer.”

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

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

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

“Was it during the war?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nee, sir.”

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

“That is the story, Baas.”

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

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

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

The tunnel, which narrowed in from the end of the fissure, was half blocked. Colvin lighted another vesta, and bent down. Through the piled-up dust he made out what looked like a square rectangular stone. Stone? No—it was wood. It was one of three long flat packing-cases, piled one on top of the other. His nerves tingled with excitement. What discovery was he on the point of making? At any rate, whatever it might be, he would make it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Seven.

## An Evil Ambush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Even as he had expected, Gideon Roux was not at home. His wife, a large, fat, and albeit quite young, already shapeless person, untidy and slatternly of attire, came forward and tendered a moist paw, with the simple salutation “Daag!” or “good-day”—an example followed by her sister, who was a replica of herself though a trifle more shapely and less slovenly but not less awkward. Several brats, in varying stages of dirt, hung around, finger in mouth, gaping at the new arrival. There were some strange Boers there too, with whom Colvin exchanged greetings; but their manner was awkward and constrained. It was a relief to him when his hostess declared that dinner was ready.

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

Through all her natural stolidity it struck Colvin that both the countenance and manner of his hostess wore a flurried, not to say scared, look. She seemed to try and avoid conversation with him; and it squared with the fact of Gideon Roux being from home.

Could any information be got out of her? To this end he began to question her in an artless conversational way.

“Gideon will be in directly, Juffrouw?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now, Gideon Roux was no fool of a Boer, neither was his confederate Hermanus Delport, consequently, having disappeared over the neck in the direction of the former’s home, they proceeded to execute a backward manoeuvre. Leaving their horses standing about twenty yards the other side, and well out of sight, they stealthily retraced their

steps until they could gain a point which commanded a view of Gert Bondelzwart and the two horses under his charge. Not long had they been there before they saw all they wanted to see. They saw Colvin emerge from the cave under the krantz, and descend to where he had left his servant. But they did not wait until he had rejoined the latter. Mounting their horses, they sent those astonished animals along at a break-neck gallop, which brought them to the homestead fully twenty minutes earlier than the expected visitor. It took them less than five to execute their next move, which was to exchange their long Martinis for a Mauser rifle apiece—a weapon which had not then, openly at any rate, reached the Wildschutsberg section of country, and which they fished out from some hidden recess. Cartridges and a bottle of 'dop' they placed in a haversack, and with a significant injunction to their fellow-countrymen there gathered, to keep the Englishman talking and making merry as late as possible, they rode off into the veldt again, taking a line which would put them out of sight of the house in about three minutes.

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

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

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

"That is so," replied the big Boer laconically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In effect the surroundings were very much in harmony with the dark deed of blood which these two miscreants were here to perpetrate. The wild and rugged recesses of the Wildschutsbergen, sparsely inhabited and but seldom travelled, spread around in grim, forbidding desolation. Great krantzes towered skyward, rearing up from the apex of smooth boulder-strewn grass slopes, and here and there a lofty coffee-canister shaped cone, turret-headed, and belted round with the same smooth cliff-face, stood like a giant sentinel. Below, the valleys, deep and rugged, seamed with dongas, and that through which the track lay, skirting the now dry bed of the Sneeuw River. No sign of life was upon this abode of desolation; no grazing flock, or stray klompje of horses, not even a bird, springing chirruping from the grass; and away yonder the further crags stood

against a background of inky cloud, which, gradually working nearer, amid low mutterings of thunder, was bringing the storm which should act as accomplice in hiding the slain victims of the two ambushed murderers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter Eight.

## Tragical—And Aletta.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, the usual way, Hans.”

“So? You are going home, then.”

“Oh yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Gert.”

“Baas?”

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

“Part of it, sir.”

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

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Gert, you are an ass.”

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two things came into Colvin’s mind, as eventually he reined in his panting, snorting steed. One of the bullets, at any rate, had missed him very narrowly, but by just the distance the animal had backed when shying from the ghostly object which had scared it; and but for the fact of his being a first-rate rider the suddenness of the bolt would have unseated him, and he would now be lying in the road at the mercy of his would-be assassins. But—where was Gert?

He looked around. The clouds had parted a little and the moon was visible through a rift thus formed; indeed it was the sudden flash of the moonlight upon the white stone that had so terrified the horse at first. The light revealed the mountain slopes rising up around, but of his servant there was no sign. He listened intently. No sound, save the creaking of the saddle, caused by the violently heaving flanks of his panting steed, and now and again a mutter of distant thunder away up in the mountains. Where was Gert?

Dismounting, he led the animal a little way off the road, and sat down under a large boulder to think out the situation. The warning of Hans Vermaak again came into his mind. It looked genuine as viewed by subsequent lights, but whether it was so or not, it was useless, for the murderers had altered their original plan, clearly resolving to provide against the contingency of his choosing the other of the two roads, by shooting him before he should come to the point where these parted. Well, they had not shot him, but it had been a narrow shave—very.

But if they had not shot him had they shot Gert? It looked uncommonly like it. Only the four shots had been fired—of that he felt certain—but since his horse had taken matters into its own hands, or, rather, legs, he had obtained neither sight nor sound of Gert. Seated there in the darkness, he was conscious of a very considerable feeling of indignation begotten of a dual reason—that he had had a mean advantage taken of him, and that his property, in the person of Gert Bondelzwart, had been interfered with.

What was to be done next? Should he go back? To do so would be to commit an act of fatal rashness, for it would be to expose himself once more to the fire of his concealed cowardly foes, who would not be likely to let slip a second opportunity. True, he had his

revolver, but not for a moment would they be likely to come near enough to give him any chance of using it. No—to go back would be simply throwing away his life. Had it been a white man and a comrade, he would unhesitatingly have done so. But Gert was a Griqua, and, though not exactly a savage, had all the cunning and resource and endurance of generations of savage ancestry. If he were alive, why then, amid the rocks and the darkness, he would soon elude his enemies; if he were dead, Colvin did not see any sense in throwing away his own life merely to ascertain that fact.

The moon had gone in, and a misty scud-wrack spreading itself overhead was creeping around the dim crags on high. There was a smell of rain in the air, and a fitful puff of wind came singing down the valley, laden with an icy breath. Colvin shivered, and as he looked anxiously skyward a large drop or two of rain plashed down on his face. There would be a deluge in a moment, and he had nothing to meet it with save the clothes in which he stood up.

Suddenly the horse, which had been standing with its head down still panting after its race and scare, pricked up its ears and snorted, then began backing away. Colvin had just time to seize the bridle-rein, or it would have been off in wild stampede. And now every vein in his body quivered with excitement. His revolver was in his hand. Let them come. The chances now were something like equal.

But it is not a pleasant thing to know that you are being stalked in the dark by a persistent and murderous foe; and as for some minutes no further sign occurred the excitement became dashed with something like apprehension, then succeeded a feeling of relief. The horse had been scared by one of the ordinary sights of the veldt—a sneaking jackal—perhaps a meerkat—in short, anything moving will startle a horse in the dark, let alone one so thoroughly “in the dispositions” for panic as this one now was. But just then a renewed snort, accompanied by a plunge and a violent tugging at the bridle-rein, set all Colvin’s pulses bounding again; and though he endeavoured to do so silently, so as not to betray his exact whereabouts, the hammer of his pistol, as he drew it up, gave forth a sharp click upon the stillness.

Out of the darkness came a voice—a beseeching voice—saying in Boer Dutch:

“Nay, Baas, don’t shoot. My well-loved Baas, don’t shoot.”

“Gert, you fool, come here.”

“Yes, it is Gert, Baas,” answered the voice in a tone of intense delight and relief. “Maagtig! I thought it was those schelm Boers. I thought you were shot. I thought I was shot. I thought we were all shot.”

“Well, we are not. But where is Pansy?”

“She was shot, Baas. Ah, the poor mare! She just sank down in the road with her legs under her. I had hardly time to roll off when she was up again, gave a stagger, and toppled over into the river bed. I crouched down in the sluit by the roadside and lay perfectly still—still as a hare—until the moon went in again. Then I crept away. Ja, it was a fearful time. I thought I could feel the bullets through me every minute. Maagtig! but he is a schelm Boer is Gideon Roux.”

“Gideon Roux? Why do you think it was Gideon Roux, Gert?”

“It was, Baas. He and Hermanus Delport. I would swear to it,” rejoined the Griqua excitedly. “They looked murder when they were talking to me. There was murder in their faces, Ja, it is those two.”

Colvin cursed to himself, and vowed revenge. He was fond of his horses, and these two rascals had shot one of his best. At the same time he owned to himself ruefully that the chance of carrying out such vengeance was remote. At present he was far more an object for their vengeance than they for his.

“Come now, Gert, we must get along. Lay hold of my stirrup-leather and trot alongside.”

They got into the road again, but with the moon behind the cloud and the rain that was beginning to fall it became very dark. What if the vindictive Dutchmen, guessing they had failed, were to take a short cut behind the ridge and voerlij them further down? The thought was unpleasant, to put it mildly.

Now there was a whirl and a roar in the air, and, in an icy blast, the rain swooped down in torrents. Colvin, destitute of macintosh or wrap of any kind, was soaked through and through in about two minutes, and shivered exceedingly. Fortunately the deluge was behind him, or, coming down obliquely as it did, Aasvogel could hardly have made headway against it. Now and then a vivid flash of lightning gleamed forth, showing the sheer of the great crags overhead and the glistening slopes studded with wet stones.

“Hurry up, Gert. Put your best foot forward, man. We have to race the river this shot. The Ratels Hoek drift will be running twelve feet deep before we get there if we don’t look smart.”

And the Griqua, puffing and perspiring, did put his best foot forward.

Stephanus De la Rey, having just finished his supper, had come out on to the stoep to look at the weather. The deluge of the last hour had subsided, but the clouds, black as ink and unbroken, gave promise of a repetition of the same.

"Aha!" he said, gleefully to himself. "The drought is at an end. The river is already coming down well, and the dams must be overflowing. I shall pump a lot of water on to the lucerne beds to-morrow. But— What is that?"

The clink of shod horse hoofs came upon the wind through the swirl and roar of the fast-swelling river. He stood listening intently. The sound ceased, then arose again, now on this side of the drift. The next moment a very soaked and dripping horseman emerged into the light of the windows, and beside him trotted a pedestrian, no less soaked and dripping, but very much blown.

"Why, Colvin, where are you from? Maagtig, kerel! but you are wet," he cried. Then raising his voice: "Windvogel, Swaartbooi. Turn out, you schepsels, and take the Baas' horse."

"Wet? I'm nearly dead with cold, Stephanus. So bring along a soepje, old chap, and let's get to a fire and dry myself."

"Dry yourself? It's dry clothes you have to get into. Come this way. My volk will see to your horse. Here now, what can we get you into? My things are too wide for you, Cornelis' and Jan's are too small. You will have to get into some of mine."

And having dragged out of a drawer a complete refit for his guest, whom he had marched straight into his own room, the genial Dutchman went out and reappeared in a moment with a decanter of excellent "dop" and glasses.

"That's grand!" ejaculated Colvin, fortifying himself with a liberal soepje during the changing process. But not yet was he going to impart his adventures to his host. The latter had a great laugh over his attempts to carry off the fit of clothes that were both too long and too wide.

"Well, no matter," he said. "You are dry, at any rate, and by this time warm. So come along in and have some supper."

Colvin followed his host into the dining-room. The evening meal was just over, but already a place had been cleared and laid for him. As he shook hands with Mrs De la Rey, he noticed a girl—one he did not recollect ever having seen before. She was just receiving a dish from a Hottentot servant, and arranging it on the table at the place laid

for him. Then, turning, she came up to him, with outstretched hand, and a bright smile of cordial welcome on her face.

“Oh, I had forgotten,” said Stephanus. “You two have not met before. Colvin, this is my eldest girl—Aletta.”

## Chapter Nine.

## "Only a Boer Girl."

A vision of the portraits flashed through Colvin's mind—the portraits at which he had so often looked, with but faint interest, representing as they did a heavy-looking awkward girl, with hunched shoulders, whom he had set down in his own mind as a mere squat, ugly replica of Condaas. One of the portraits itself stared him in the face even now, over and beyond the shoulder of its original. And this was the original! He saw before him a tall and graceful girl, straight as a dart. Her head, slightly thrown back, as she greeted him with frank and self-possessed composure, was beautifully poised, and crowned with a bounteous coil of silky brown hair. She had lustrous hazel eyes, which could light up in a wonderful way when animated, and a fresh and delicate colour. He noticed, too, that the hand which he took in his was long and soft and tapering—in short, she looked thoroughbred from head to heel, and yet, judged by the most ordinary canons of beauty, he recognised that Aletta De la Rey was not even pretty.

Her features were lacking. They were not regular, and the mouth was somewhat too large. But it was redeemed by white and even teeth, and a way of rippling into a sudden, whole-hearted, and very musical laugh; indeed, the whole expression of her face would light up in a way that rendered it subtly but most unequivocally taking and attractive.

Now, as she greeted Colvin Kershaw for the first time a gleam of just that sudden mirth shot from her eyes. He, reading it aright, became alive to the fact that he did not show to his best advantage, rigged out in a suit of her father's clothes, which was both too long and too wide for him, and, for once in a way, he owned, within his inner self, to a consciousness of feeling ever so slightly disconcerted. But he said quietly:

"Be merciful, Miss De la Rey. At any rate, I am dry and warm after my soaking, for which I feel devoutly grateful."

The colour rushed into Aletta's face as a very wave, but the laugh did not go out of her eyes; on the contrary, it intensified in its struggle not to break forth.

"What a thought-reader you are, Mr Kershaw!" she answered. "But, don't—please don't think me very rude, but—I've—I've heard so much about you that—I seem to know you well already—"

And then the laugh would no longer be kept down. It broke forth in a merry, hearty, silvery peal.

“Aletta!” cried her mother, horror-stricken. “How can you be so rude? What will Mr Kershaw think of you? And when are you going to begin and pour out his coffee for him?”

But, whatever Colvin thought or did not think, there was something so entirely infectious in that laugh that he was joining in it himself with a whole-heartedness which left nothing to be desired; and there was the strange spectacle of two people who had just met for the first time, laughing—as they afterwards put it to each other—like a pair of idiots, one at the other, and that other joining heartily in the joke against himself.

“It’s—it’s all right, Miss De la Rey,” said the latter, when sufficiently recovered to be able to speak coherently. “I am glad to hear you say you seem to know me so well already, because in that case you wilt know that I like nothing better than to be treated as one of the family.”

It was a tactful speech, and the girl looked thoroughly capable of appreciating it. So, too, was her mother, who remarked:

“It’s so good of you to say so, Mr Kershaw. Really, I don’t know what has come over Aletta. They don’t seem to have improved at all in Cape Town.”

Colvin, to himself, opined that they rather had; indeed, exhaustively so, remembering the weird impression of her set up within his mind by the portraits taken before she left for that capital. He knew, however, that the tone in which this reproach was conveyed took the sting out of the words, which, indeed, it clean belied.

“I didn’t know that your eldest daughter was even expected back, Mrs De la Rey,” he said.

“No? Aletta came back rather suddenly, and she has come back with all sorts of notions she had better have left behind. Of course, all our people down there belong to the Bond, and we support the Bond ourselves. Yet politics and war-talk over and over again are not fit subjects for girls.”

“Now, mother, you are far too old-fashioned. I am going to brush you quite up to date,” answered Aletta brightly, but in a sort of caressing tone. “And you must not start Mr Kershaw with a bad opinion of me, like that. It isn’t fair.”

Colvin owned to himself that that would be difficult, inasmuch as he had started with too good a one on sight and his own responsibility. He had been observing her narrowly while he sat there thoroughly enjoying an excellent supper, and already had not failed to

notice that she had a soft and perfectly refined voice and pretty ways. Unlike the others, her English was without accent, save for the little tricks of speech by which you may pick out a born Cape Colonist in any crowd, such as clipping the final "r," or ever so slight a hardening of the vowel at the beginning of the word, and others; tricks of speech which are not unpleasing, and are, moreover, as fully prevalent among children born in the Colony, of emigrated English parents and without a drop of Dutch blood in them.

"But where are the other girls, Mrs De la Rey?" he asked.

"Away. They went to stay with their uncle, Piet Venter, for a few days just before we knew Aletta was coming back. They will be home to-morrow, or as soon as he can bring them."

"Who is that talking over there?" croaked a feminine voice from a far corner, in Dutch—a voice that sounded both irritable and antique. "It seems like that of an Englishman. Nay—I don't know what this good land of ours is coming to. The tongue our fathers spoke with before us was good enough for me in my young days. Now everybody must be chattering in English—a tongue only fit for baboons."

"It is Tant' Plessis," said Mrs De la Rey in English and an undertone, "a sort of distant cousin of Stephanus'; I had forgotten she was in the room. She doesn't say a word for a whole day, sometimes."

Colvin, who had now finished his meal, went over to the speaker, who was seated in a huge armchair in a dark corner. She was a typical old-time Boer vrouw, large-faced, heavy, and shapeless. She had small eyes, and her thin hair, which, however, was still almost black, was plastered down flat upon her head.

"Daag, Tanta," (Good-day, Aunt) he said, extending his hand. The old woman stared at him for a moment in a sort of semi-distrustful, semi-resentful way, then touched it with a flabby paw.

"Daag, Neef," (Good-day, nephew) she replied, then subsided, leaving the other to carry on the conversation—which he did, descanting mainly upon the fine rain which was still falling. She cut him short ruthlessly by calling out:

"Gertruida, who is he?"

Mrs De la Rey, thus invoked, came over to explain.

“Ah, yes. An Englishman! I could have seen that by the way he talks. He does not talk well.”

Colvin, glancing round sedately, caught the flash of mirth which had begun to light up Aletta’s face. He thought there was some fun coming directly.

“Who is he? What is his name?” she went on.

“It’s Mr Kershaw, Tanta,” explained Mrs De la Rey. “He often comes here.”

“I asked what his name was,” shrilled the old woman, bringing the end of her stick down hard upon the floor. “Is it Abram Kershaw, or Izaak Kershaw, or what is it?”

“No, Tanta. It’s Colvin—Colvin Kershaw,” replied that worthy himself, conscious of something between a gurgle and a sob in the direction of Aletta.

“Calvin. Oh, yes. Calvin—Calvinus, that is. You have a good name, nephew. Ja, I have often heard the predikant talk of Calvinus—and preach about him too. Johan was his first name. Ja, he was a good man was Calvinus. He killed a great many Roman Catholics—burnt them all. I have often heard Mynheer say so.”

The gurgling in Aletta’s direction was now becoming convulsive. Colvin himself was inconveniently infected.

“Perhaps you are of his family, nephew,” went on Tant’ Plessis. “His grandson, perhaps? You must be of his family if you have his name. Well, follow in his footsteps—though to be sure there could not be such a good and great man as Calvinus. He burnt ever so many Roman Catholics. I’ve heard Mynheer say so; and if he does not know, who does?”

This was too much. Aletta fairly broke down, and, striving to flee from the room in blind precipitation, was brought up in the doorway by the stalwart and substantial proportions of her father, who was entering, and against whom she collided violently.

“So—so! What fun is on now?” cried Stephanus, at once infected by her mirth. “Aletta, you are a very wicked little girl. You are always laughing. Only wicked little girls always laugh, and at their elders too, I believe. What is it, Tanta? You have been amusing the child?”

This was carrying the war into the enemy’s camp with a vengeance.

“Nee—nee! I have not been amusing anybody,” replied the old lady very testily. “I do not know what girls are coming to in these days—jabbering nothing but English—a tongue only fit for baboons—and laughing at their elders.”

“Softly, softly, Tanta. There is an Englishman here!” expostulated Stephanus, with a wink at Colvin.

“Ja, I know there is,” was the still more testy reply. “But he is not like other Englishmen. His name is Calvin. He is of the family of that good man Calvinus, who burnt ever so many Roman Catholics. He did. Ask Mynheer if he did not. I have heard him say so ever so many times, both in church and out. And he ought to know. I have been telling this Englishman I hoped he would ever remember his grandfather’s example.”

“Let the joke stand, Stephanus,” said Colvin in an undertone. “It’s about the very best I’ve heard for such a long time.”

But the next utterance put forward by this weird old party was destined to prove somewhat less amusing—to the object thereof, at any rate.

“When is this Englishman going to marry Wenlock’s sister?” she blared out, during an interval of profound silence, and talking sublimely past the object of the remark. “When is it to be, Gertruida?”

Poor Mrs De la Rey grew red with confusion.

“What are you saying, Tanta?” she stammered.

“What am I saying? Why, he is engaged to her. Several people have told me. Of course he is. She is the only English girl here, and he is the only Englishman. So of course they are engaged. That settles it.”

“But, Tanta, I assure you I am not engaged to anybody,” struck in Colvin. Coming on the top of his own meditations only that morning the remark jarred on him. Somehow, being made as it was this evening, it more than doubly jarred on him, why, he could not have told then, but he knew afterwards.

“Not engaged to her?” repeated this antique terror. “Then you ought to be. All young men ought to be married as soon as possible; it is a duty they owe to themselves and the community, and you are rather an old young man. Nee, I do not believe you. Your grandfather, the great and good Calvinus, would not have said what was not true; and I have heard this from many people, so it must be true.”

“Well, it is not true, Tanta, however many people say it,” said Colvin, with emphasis, and an unpleasant consciousness of feeling ever so slightly foolish. Aletta, he could see, was in the wildest throes of suppressed mirth, and Stephanus had to flee the room and go and stand out in the pouring rain and laugh till he cried. “I tell you it is absolutely true that I am not engaged to anybody, and am not in the least likely to be.”

“Then you ought to be ashamed of yourself, nephew,” retorted the old woman, whacking the floor with her stick. “What do you suppose the good God gave you health and strength for—”

“No, this is getting too thick,” said Colvin in an undertone.

“Good-night, Tanta. I want to see Stephanus upon some very important business before he goes to bed. Good-night”; and he made for the door.

The old woman subsided, nodded a little, and then made up her mind to go to bed. When she had done so Colvin returned, accompanied by Stephanus. Aletta’s bright face lit up at sight of him, and with the consciousness that she could now laugh unrestrained.

“Upon my word, Miss De la Rey,” he said, “your respected relative is something of a terror. First, she wants to make me three or four hundred years old by assigning me for grandfather some historic old bore who flourished in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, I forget which. Then she is eager to rush me into a haphazard matrimonial contract. No, really it is laying it on just a little too thick.”

“Oh, it was awfully funny. But, do you know, Mr Kershaw, we had heard just the same thing? We didn’t tell her, you know, but we had heard it,” said Aletta, her face brimming over with mischief.

“Well, you heard what has no foundation in fact, what is entirely untrue,” he answered, with some vague stirring over the emphasis wherewith he did answer, remembering the psychological moment of two or three nights ago.

“You met the Patriot here not long since, did you not, Mr Kershaw?” said Aletta, changing the subject with perfect ease.

“Which Patriot? There are so many patriots now,” he replied.

“Why, the Patriot. The one from Pretoria, of course.”

“Andries Botma? Oh yes, I met him. We had some very interesting talk together. I had long wanted to see him.”

“But—but—you are not of us,” said the girl, looking up quickly from her work-basket.

“This little girl is a red-hot patriot, Colvin,” said Stephanus, resting a large hand lightly upon the silky brown coil. “But, to be serious, I hope this will all quiet down and find its level.”

“Of course; are we not all jolly good friends together, Stephanus? We don’t want to be at each other’s throats at the bidding of other people.”

This remark brought Aletta up.

“But you said you had long wanted to meet the Patriot, Mr Kershaw. Why did you want to see him, then?”

“Because he is something unique—a really honest agitator. He means what he says and believes every word of it most thoroughly. He is full of verve and fire—in a word, a strong man. His is an immensely striking personality.”

“Well done, well done,” cried Aletta, clapping her hands enthusiastically. “I shall make a convert of you yet. Oh yes, I shall.”

It became bedtime. As she gave him his candle Colvin once more could not help being struck with the refined grace of Aletta’s every movement—the soft, clear, thoroughbred tone of her voice. She seemed somehow to have been cast in a different mould from her sisters, to whom he had always pictured her as inferior both in looks and presence. It fairly puzzled him. The tones of her voice seemed to linger long after he had retired. He had had a long, tiring, exciting day—had undergone a very narrow escape for his life—which circumstance, by the way, he had not yet mentioned to his host, being desirous to sleep on it first, and having enjoined strict silence upon his retainer—yet, now that he should have dropped into a sound, recuperative slumber, he could not. And the sole reason that he could not—as he must perforce admit to himself in the darkness and privacy of his chamber—was the recollection of this girl whom he had met but the first time that night—here, on a remote Dutch farm in the Wildschutsbergen. And she was “only a Boer girl!”

## Chapter Ten.

### "If—."

"Well, child, and what do you think of 'our only Englishman'?" said Mrs De la Rey, as they were putting away the "early coffee" things the following morning.

"I like him, mother," replied Aletta. "I oughtn't to because I have heard so much about him. That is sure to start one with a prejudice against anybody. Still, I think I shall. Oh, wasn't Tant' Plessis killing about 'the only Englishman' and 'the only English girl'? By the way, was there anything in it?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know," laughed her mother. "Only he seemed a little too anxious to deny it. One can never tell. May Wenlock is a very pretty girl."

"Is she? I never saw her. I remember Frank Wenlock—a good sort of boy, but something of a lout. Now, this one is ever so different."

"Oh, mijn Vaterland!" grunted a voice from the armchair. "There they are, jabbering English again—a tongue only fit for baboons."

Mother and daughter looked round quickly, exchanged a meaning smile, and went on with their subject. They were accustomed to the old woman's growls, and took no more notice of them than if she had been a discontented child.

"Let's drive over and see the Wenlocks one day, mother," said Aletta. "I am curious to see the only English girl here. Besides, I shall be able to see in a moment whether there is really any fire beneath Tant' Plessis' smoke. Yes—that will be great fun."

"What sort of ideas have you brought back with you from Cape Town, child?" cried Mrs De la Rey, apparently shocked though really intensely amused.

"That's all right, old mother. I have become 'advanced'—in fact, down there everybody took me for an English girl. And I have learnt to ride a bicycle. No, really, I wish I had one here. Only imagine Tanta's face if I went skimming along the road there down to the gate and back on two wheels. Heavens, I believe it would kill her. She'd get a fit," And again that silvery peal rang out long and clear.

"Aletta! Don't make such a noise, child. Why, you have quite startled Mr Kershaw—look, away down there at the bottom of the garden. He is looking up this way, quite startled."

“Is he? Where? Oh, I see,” following her mother’s glance through the window. “I think I’ll go and talk to him. He is going to be fun, I believe. You know, I like the English—those of the better sort—although I am a thorough patriot. This one is of the better sort—you can tell directly you see him, and you can hear it directly he opens his mouth. Oh yes, I’ve seen lots of them. Yes, I shall go and talk to him.”

Away she went, singing to herself. Her mother could see her through the window, stopping here and there to pick a flower or train up a drooping bough. Colvin did not seem aware of her approach. His head was bent down, and he seemed to be filling a pipe.

“Gertruida!”

Mrs De la Rey turned with a start.

“What is it, Tanta?”

“Where has the girl gone?”

“Who? Aletta?”

“Who? Aletta? What other girl has just gone out, I would like to know?” snapped Tant’ Plessis, bringing down her stick hard upon the floor. “Where has she gone?”

“Gone? Only to look at the garden after the rain,” answered poor Mrs De la Rey, somewhat guiltily.

“Now you are lying, Gertruida,” rapped out the old woman. “Ah, if I could only give you the strop again as I used to do when you were a child!” shaking her stick viciously. “You, a mother of a grown-up family, to lie like that. Really you are a case to bring before Mynheer and the Kerkraad (Church Council). You know perfectly well that that girl has gone out to flirt with the Englishman.”

“She has not, Tant’ Plessis. You have no right to say such things,” retorted Mrs De la Rey, stung to momentary wrath. “It is you who are saying what is not true about my child.”

“Stil, stil! So that is the result of all the strop I used to give you, Gertruida—to call your elders liars! You think I know no English. I do, although I would sooner die than speak the accursed tongue. I heard Aletta say she was going out to flirt with the Englishman.”

“She didn’t say ‘flirt,’ Tanta. She said ‘talk.’”

“Well, well! What is the difference, I would like to know? To go out like that—to go up to a man and talk with him all alone in a garden! So that is the result of sending her to learn English ways. English ways, indeed! No wonder the English were made, like the heathen of old, to fall before the rifles of the Patriots. They were. I have heard Mynheer say so, and if he doesn’t know, who does?”

“I don’t care what Mynheer says—or thinks, Tanta. I shall bring up my children in my own way,” flashed out Mrs De la Rey, losing patience.

“In the devil’s own way you mean, Gertruida,” said the other, waxing very portentous and solemn. “Look at my own children—five girls and seven boys. My girls got plenty of strop”—(“Surely they did!” interpolated the listener to herself)—“and now that they are married they give theirs plenty too. For what says the Prophet Solomon in the Holy Book: ‘Spare the strop and you spoil the girl.’ The Prophet did say that, for I have heard Mynheer read it out in church.” The speaker herself could scarcely read. “Look at my girls. They learnt no English ways.”

In imagination Mrs De la Rey did so look, and beheld five women who were exact counterparts of their proud parent, albeit younger presentments, and each owning a large brood as heavy as herself. But she had had enough of this lecture, and began to cast about for a pretext to depart.

Aletta the while was tripping down the garden path, pausing, as we have said, as though to tend the flowers had been her sole object in coming out, and as she walked she sang:

“Spreek, Bronkersspruit,
Met eerbied uit;
Noem Potchefstrom by naam.
Pretoria en Langsnek pas,
Ingogo en Majuba vas,
Waar ons Verlosser met ons was,
Vermeld die al te saam.
Vermeld die al te saam.”

Colvin Kershaw pricked up his ears, but did not raise his head. For that which she was singing was a snatch of the Transvaal “Volkslied,” the Republican National Anthem. She was singing it at him, of course. This was really getting funny. She was quite close to him now.

“Ons vrye vlag

Geef nou onstag,
Die vierkleur waal in eer,
En wapper oer die Republiek;
Geen mag, geen lis, geen politiek
Van Kaffer, Brit, of Jingo-kliek,
Haal ooit die vlag weer neer.
Haal ooit die vlag weer neer!"

(Note 2.)
"Good morning, Mr Kershaw. You are up early. Englishmen are not fond of early rising as a rule."

"Good morning, Miss De la Rey. You seem in a vastly patriotic mood this morning. Can a poor Englishman by any chance do anything that comes within measurable distance of being right?"

Aletta laughed, but not quite in the same whole-hearted way she usually did. There was something in the look of this man, standing there, easy, good-humoured, smiling, which seemed to strike her. She had been favourably impressed with him the evening before, when he had not shown externally to the best advantage, and, whatever cheap ethicists may propound to the contrary, externals and impressions go very much hand in hand. Now he was clad in his own clothes, not in scratch garments many sizes too wide for him. As she had just been telling her mother, she had seen at a glance that he was thoroughbred; now he looked more so than ever.

"Oh yes, he can—sometimes," she said. "You know, I like the English of a certain sort, though I detest those of another."

"Well, why do you bear down upon me singing an aggressive war-song—at me? At me, of course."

"Was I?"

"You know you were. You were rubbing in Bronker's Spruit, and Ingogo, and Majuba, and all that."

"It's rather chilly after the rain," she said, looking around with a shiver. "But it is going to be a lovely day."

Her irrelevant prediction was true enough. Not a cloud remained in the sky, which was deepening more and more to its vivid daylight blue, as the sun, just rising over a great

ironstone krantz which crested the range beyond the river, flooded the wide valley, dissipating the faint mist engendered by the night's moisture, and causing the raindrops still lingering on the Karroo bushes and scattered mimosa to scintillate like the purest diamonds. Birds twittered among the willows by the dam, and in the quince hedges, and away over the wide veldt, the cock koorhaans answered each other in their shrill, barking crow, as though rejoicing in the glowing splendour of the newly-born day.

"Yes, I think it is," he answered. "But, to come back to what we were saying. I don't think that 'Volkslied' is much of a song, you know. For instance, 'Van Kaffer, Brit, of Jingo-kliek' is a pretty good sample of doggerel. Then, again, the whole thing is a little too pietistic for ordinary use. The tune is a fine one, but the words—well, they are a trifle poor."

"Are they? Oh yes—and what about 'God Save the Queen'? Isn't that just as pietistic? And 'Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks'—how is that for doggerel, eh?" And, firing up with her subject, Aletta's face became quite animated, and the colour rushed over it in such wise as to render it very attractive—at least, so thought the onlooker, and secretly rejoiced in the situation, enjoying it hugely.

"H'm, well, perhaps. But, doesn't it strike you, Miss De la Rey, that you are wasting your cartridges by blazing them into me? Why, I am more than half of your way of thinking already. Ask your father if I am not."

The girl's face changed entirely, taking on a wondrously pleased expression. The defiant one had utterly vanished. Colvin began fumbling for a match wherewith to relight his pipe, which had gone out. In reality he was thinking what there was about this girl which appealed to him so strongly. She was not even pretty. Yet, standing there, tall and graceful and fresh, in the early morning; a very soul of mind looking out of her eyes with the enthusiasm born of a cherished subject, she was more—she was marvellously attractive. The strange, lingering feeling which her presence had left upon him the night before was intensified here in the prosaic morning hour. What was it?

"There are patriots, however," he went on, "who are not always shining angels of light. Listen now, and I'll tell you what happened to me yesterday in that connection. Would you like to hear?"

"Of course I would."

Then he told her—told her everything, from the discovery of the concealed arms to the suspicious non appearance of the man he had gone to see; of Hans Vermaak's mysterious warning, and the subsequent ample justification thereof—the narrow escape

he and his servant had had for their lives when fired upon murderously in the darkness by ambushed assailants—up to the time of his arriving at Ratels Hoek, when she had first seen him. Told her the whole story—her—this girl whom twelve hours ago he had never seen—this girl only just out of her teens. Told her, when as yet he had not told her father, a strong man of mature age, and one of his most intimate friends. Why did he do it? He hardly knew himself, unless it were that something in her personality appealed to him as marking her out not merely from the rest of her sex, but from the general ruck.

She listened attentively, absorbedly; her eyes fixed upon his face.

"Yes, that was bad," she said. "But then, you know, Mr Kershaw, as you English say—there are black sheep in every flock, and the people back there in the Wildschutsberg are a low class of Boer, very little removed from bijwoners (squatter labourers). But"—as if she had said too much and was trying to cover it—"do you not think they may have been only wanting to frighten you; to play a joke on you?"

"It was a joke that cost me an uncommonly good mare," he answered. "The poor brute was plugged through and rolled into the river. I dare say she is half-way down to the sea by this time—as I and Gert would have been but for, I suppose, Providence."

She was looking grave enough now, and for a few moments made no reply.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"Nothing."

He fancied a look of relief came into her face. She must be intensely imbued with the cause of her countrymen, with racial partisanship, he decided.

"Nothing? But if you think they tried to murder you?"

"Oh, I don't think much of that. I'm not going to bother any more about it. Why should I?"

"But you English are always such a—well, vindictive race. It is one of your favourite boasts that you never let anybody get the better of you—that you are always even with them—I think that is the phrase," she said, and there was a strange look upon her face which rather puzzled him.

"Are we? Well, here's an exception then. Life is too short to bother oneself about trifles merely for the sake of 'being even with' somebody. Likely one of these days Gideon Roux

will be the first to be sorry he shot at me. He needn't have done it. The cave affair and the rifles didn't concern me. I shouldn't have given it away. But he won't come down with the value of the mare, because I believe the poor devil is none too flush at any time. So what does it matter?"

That strange look upon Aletta's face deepened. He did not quite know how to read it.

"Have you told father about this?" she said.

"Not yet. I had meant to. I don't think I shall at all now. It doesn't seem worth while."

"Then why did you tell me?"

"I don't know."

Again they stood looking at each other in silence, as though reading each other. He was thinking of how he had seen her last night—bright, sparkling, girlish—full of humour and merriment; yet even then he had judged her temperament to have another side. Now his judgment was borne out. She could show herself serious, grave, judicious—in short, full of character when a matter of moment was under discussion. She for her part was thinking that of all the men she had met, and she had met many—for Stephanus De la Rey was connected with some of the best old Dutch families at the Cape, and in the society of the capital, Dutch or English, Aletta had not merely had the entrée, but had been in request—she had never come into contact with one who was quite like this. He was right outside her ordinary experience.

A sound of approaching hoof-strokes aroused them—on Aletta's part with something of a start. A bridle path threaded the garden here, affording a considerable short cut up from the river drift, and the horseman now advancing along this had come out through the quince hedge almost upon them. In him they recognised Adrian De la Rey.

"Daag, Aletta. I have only just heard you were home again," he said in Dutch, as he sprang from his horse and shook hands with her. But Colvin did not fail to notice that the young Boer's greeting of himself was markedly cold, not to say grim.

"So ho!" said he to himself. "That is the way the cat jumps? I see." Then aloud, "What sort of rifle have you there, Adrian?" For the latter was clad and armed as though for the chase, and had a bandolier full of cartridges slung round him.

"One of the new kind," was the crisp reply. "A Mauser. Ja, you can kill a man at thousands of yards with this."

“So you could, if you could only see him,” was the perfectly good-humoured reply.

“I shall see him plainly enough, at whatever distance. Ja, at whatever distance,” repeated the young Boer with meaning; and, looking as black as thunder, he turned his back upon the other in rather a pointed manner, and began to converse with his cousin.

“Yet,” said Colvin to himself, “yet we have always been the best of friends. But that would prove a very awkward customer if— Yes,” he repeated, always to himself. “If—”

Note 1.

“Speak, Bronkersspruit,
With pride speak out;
Call Potchefstrom by name.
Pretoria and Langnek’s Pass,
Ingogo and Majuba,
Where our Deliverer was with us,
Proclaim them all together.”
Note 2.

“Our freedom’s flag Give now its praise, ‘Four colours’ hold in renown; It waves above the Republic. No force, intrigue, no politics Of Kafir, Briton, Jingo clique, Shall e’er that flag again haul down.”

## Chapter Eleven.

## Love—and some Sport.

"You are in no hurry to go on, are you, Colvin?" said Stephanus De la Rey, while they were at breakfast. "Because, if not, we might take guns and go down to the hoek. It's swarming with duiker and blekbok."

"Haven't got my gun along, Stephanus, and Aasvogel won't stand fire." The speaker deemed he had grim reason to know that, and exchanged a glance with Aletta, who had looked up quickly, at the allusion.

"Oh, that is soon got over. You can have your pick of four horses that will, and you can either take my shot-gun or one of the rifles. There will be four of us—you and I and Cornelis and Adrian—and we can drive out that hoek thoroughly."

"I don't care to hunt to-day, Oom Stephanus," said Adrian. "I must get back. I have many things to do at home."

Stephanus looked narrowly at his nephew, whose manner struck him as strange. He had replied in Dutch, whereas the conversation hitherto had been in English, but that might be due to his new-born and exuberant patriotism.

"Of course, then, you must see to them, nephew," he said. "The reason why so many of us don't get on is, that we are too fond of sitting on the stoep and smoking our pipes." He himself and his son had been at work in the "lands" and at the goatkraals ever since sunrise. At the same time he was rather surprised at the refusal of his nephew, who was a keen sportsman, and would have had a chance of testing his new rifle, which had already been inspected and its points critically discussed.

But Adrian had an object in his refusal, and the name of that object was Aletta. Hardly had the other three men got out of sight than he tried to persuade the girl to take a turn in the garden with him. Ordinarily she would have needed no persuasion, but to-day a sort of instinct rendered the idea distasteful to her. But he waxed eloquent upon their common topic—The Cause—and she yielded.

He told her about the delegate from Pretoria—"the Patriot," as he reverentially termed him, and how that Olympian Jupiter had talked with him—had it been the President himself he could hardly have felt more proud. He told her how the seed had been sown on well-watered and well-prepared ground, and she listened with real interest, for they had an ideal in common, these two young people, and were both burning with a lofty

enthusiasm. Besides, the girl was really very fond of Adrian, who was a fine, manly fellow. Now she predicted great things for him. He would rise to be one of the most prominent men in the new Dutch South Africa. There was no limit to the dazzling honours she beheld in store for him.

Yes, the conspiracy was nearly complete. There was not a Dutchman within a radius of fifty miles, he told her, who was not ready to rise, who would not muster at the appointed time and place, rifle in hand, to throw off the English yoke. Those cursed English! He trusted that their future rulers would not allow one single Englishman to remain in the country—no, not one. He hated them all.

This brought a meaning smile to Aletta's face. She remembered Adrian's manner when he had first come upon her—and the Englishman—but an hour or two before.

"But, Adrian," she said, "why are you so bitter against the English now? You used not to be. Of course we must get the land back from them, but we need not drive them all out. Some of the better ones might remain."

"There are no 'better ones,'" he replied, vehemently.

"I would not say that. Our English neighbours round here, what few there are, seem nice enough. There is Mrs Wenlock, for instance, and Frank—I haven't seen the daughter yet. And then there is that Mr Kershaw—he seems a particularly pleasant sort of man."

At this the resentful scowl on Adrian's face deepened. His strong hand opened and shut once or twice as though gripping at somebody's throat.

"So you seemed to think when I came upon you this morning," he answered in a sort of growl. Aletta started, and gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Why, Adrian, I never saw the man until last evening," she said, gently, but conscious that the colour was flowing over her face in waves. For the blunt retort had, as it were, in a flash opened her mind to herself, and what she saw therein had frightened her.

"So? Then you have turned your time to very quick use," he answered. Then, seeing her start away from him with a cold, yet hurt, look, his tone changed entirely. "Forgive me, Aletta, darling. I am jealous, I suppose, and, of course, a fool. But I love you. I always have since we were children together. And I have been longing and longing for you to come back, and have been counting the weeks to it. Ask Andrina if I have not. Then when you do come back, and I see you for the first time, it is with this Englishman.

Forgive me if I have said anything to offend you, Aletta, and say you will marry me. I love you so."

His tone was deep and soft and pleading, and the listener, stealing a look at his face, could not but feel much moved. He was so intensely in earnest. And he was a really fine-looking young fellow was this young Dutchman, a lover of whom any girl might feel the reverse of ashamed. As a matter of fact this one did so feel, and her voice was very soft as she answered:

"Oh, Adrian, why did you ask me? I don't see how I can."

It was a pretty lame answer, and she felt it to be. He, for his part, proceeded to improve the occasion and to urge his cause again and again with all the arguments he could find. She, for hers, was dangerously tempted to temporise, but by some merciful instinct rejected that refuge for the weak. She answered him to the same effect as before, but this time more clearly, more decidedly.

Then he began to press her for reasons. Why did she persist in refusing him? He was well off, and could make her thoroughly comfortable. He defied anyone to say a word against his character or life. He was sure his uncle would approve, and so on. Then, waxing bitter, he hinted that since she had been away at Cape Town she had forgotten her own people. Only the English were good enough now.

Adrian had better have let that side alone. It spoiled the good effect he was already producing in that it was first of all somewhat childish—in the second place unjust.

"That is not true, Adrian," she answered gravely, but without anger, "and you ought not to say it. I am of my own people as much as ever. I have seen English people, too, whom I like and admire. Those of good blood are second to no race in the world—for good blood is good blood all the world over. But you ought not to say some of the things you have been saying. You wound me and—insult me."

"So? I wound you and insult you? Forgive me, Aletta. I would not do that for all the world. But look! As you say, you have only known this Englishman since last evening. That is good. But the man who comes between you and me—Englishman or who ever he is—had better take care, great care, for it will mean life or death to him or to me. The time is coming when every man's rifle will be his law—the avenger of his own wrongs."

The tone was quiet now. There was that in it which was so earnest, so free from vehemence as to redeem it from mere bounce or melodramatics. Aletta, listening, was secretly impressed, and secretly more than respected him.

“You would not do murder, surely, Adrian?” she said, the narrative she had heard only that morning rising luridly before her mind.

“No, not murder, only justice. The time is coming when we can call upon those who have wronged us to face us, man to man. That is not murder.”

“N-no. But does it not strike you, Adrian, that you may be doing your best to kill all the liking and regard I have always felt for you? And are you not taking a great deal too much upon yourself?” Then, with a considerable flash of spirit, “Who gave you any right to take possession of me in this cool and calm manner? What right have you to tell me whom I am not to be friendly with—yes, and even more, if I choose that it shall be so? I think you are taking a great deal too much upon yourself, and I tell you so. But there, do not let us quarrel,” she added, with sudden softening. “And I think it is time we returned to the house.”

“As you will, Aletta. But I could not help saying that I did, for I mean it—every word of it. Of course we will not quarrel. How could I quarrel with you?”

The tone was sad and grave, but there was a dignity about it that appealed to Aletta. She did not fail to notice, either, that the other had not come off badly under somewhat difficult and delicate circumstances.

The while those upon slaughter intent were pursuing their way. Colvin Kershaw was a very keen sportsman, and reckoned that life was never so thoroughly well worth living as at moments like this—when mounted on a good shooting-horse, an excellent gun in his hand, the whole day before him, and, spreading around, as fine a bit of veldt for providing a mixed bag as one could wish to range over—just rolling enough to be picturesque—the Karroo bush and the mimosa, which grew in solitary ragged clumps or lined along the river banks, affording plenty of cover for birds or the smaller kind of buck. The sun flamed down from a blue and cloudless vault, but without much power, for it was about midwinter, and the atmosphere of the high veldt was clear and exhilarating to the last degree.

Two Kafir boys had been sent round to the further side of the “camp,” with instructions to lure thither and keep occupied such vicious male ostriches as would otherwise have interfered with, and, so far as their jurisdiction extended, entirely prevented sport; and the three horsemen were riding abreast, fifty yards or so apart, at a slow foot’s pace. Behind them walked Gert, armed with a formidable thorn tack in case any of the aggressive bipeds should assail them in preference to being fooled by the diversion

aforesaid. But just before they took up their positions, Cornelis being out of earshot, Stephanus remarked:

“I wonder what is the matter with Adrian, Colvin? I have never known him not want to hunt before. He was looking very strange, too.”

“He was,” replied the other, who had his own ideas upon that head.

“So? you noticed it, then? Well, my notion is this,” sinking his voice. “Adrian is slim. I believe he remained at home only to have a quiet talk with Aletta.”

“Yes?”

“I think so. They were always devoted to each other as children and then as they grew up together. I thought it good for her to go away and see something of the world and of people, so I sent her to some relatives of mine to Cape Town.”

“She has done them credit I don’t mind telling you, Stephanus, that even the little I’ve seen of your eldest daughter justifies me in saying she would show to advantage anywhere—yes, to the greatest advantage—in London or anywhere you like.”

“So?” said Stephanus, hugely delighted. “You think so, eh?”

“Think so? I’m sure of it,” replied Colvin, whimsically thinking with what whole-heartedness he was now eulogising one who that time yesterday had existed in his mind as a plain, heavy-looking and absolutely uninteresting girl. So libellous can be the photographer’s art.

“I am delighted to hear you say so, Colvin. You are from England and have seen a great deal of the world and ought to know. But I believe you are right. Yes, I am sure you are right. Well, now, my idea is that Adrian has remained behind to try his luck with Aletta.”

“By Jove! Has he?” Then changing the quick tone of vivid interest into which he had been momentarily betrayed, he went on tranquilly: “And do you think he will succeed?”

“I cannot say. Aletta has seen a great many people, a great many men down at the Cape. She may not care to marry a farmer. But she might do worse than take Adrian. I have a great opinion of him. He is a fine fellow and no fool. But she must please herself.”

“Yes, but—are they not—er—rather nearly related?”

“I had thought of that side of it, too. It is a disadvantage. Look out! There is a koorhaan running just on your left. He will be up in a second.”

Hardly were the words out than the bird rose, shrilling forth his loud, alarmed cackle. Colvin dropped the bridle—his gun was at his shoulder. Crack! and down came the noisy little bustard, shot fair and square through the head. Two more rose, but out of range, and the air for the next minute or two was noisy with their shoutings.

Colvin dismounted to pick up the bird, and as he did so up got another. It was a long shot, but down came this bird also.

“Get there quick, man! He’s running,” cried Stephanus.

The warning was not unneeded. The bird seemed only winged and had the grass been a little thicker would have escaped. As it was, it entailed upon its destroyer a considerable chase before he eventually knocked it out with a stone, and then only as it was about to disappear within an impenetrable patch of prickly pear.

“Well, Stephanus, I believe I’m going to score off you both to-day,” said Colvin, as he tied the birds on to the D of his saddle with a bit of riempje. “Nothing like a shot-gun in this sort of veldt.”

Boers, as a rule, seldom care for bird-shooting, looking upon it as sport for children and Englishmen. Birds in their opinion are hardly worth eating, guinea-fowl excepted. When these are required for table purposes they obtain them by the simple process of creeping stealthily up to their roost on a moonlight night, and raking the dark mass of sleeping birds—visible against the sky on the bare or scanty-leaved boughs—with a couple of charges of heavy shot Stephanus laughed good-humouredly, and said they would find buck directly. Then they would see who had the better weapon.

They had got into another enclosure, where the ground was more open. Colvin had already bagged another koorhaan and a brace of partridges, and so far was not ill-satisfied. Suddenly Cornelis was seen to dismount. A buck was running across the open some three hundred yards away. Bang! A great splash of dust nearly hid the animal for a moment. A near thing, but yet not quite near enough. On it went, going like the wind, now behind a clump of bushes now out again. Cornelis had another cartridge in, and was kneeling down. A wire fence stretched across the line of the fleeing animal, which would have to slacken speed in order to get through this. Watching his moment, Cornelis let go. The “klop” made by the bullet as it rushed through the poor little beast—through ribs and heart—was audible to them there at upwards of four hundred yards. It never moved afterwards.

“Oh, fine shot!” cried Colvin, with a grim afterthought to himself, viewing it by the light of the failure of the Bloemfontein Conference.

“It’s a duiker ram, Pa,” sang out the young Dutchman. Then he shouted to the Kafirs to bring it along, and the three moved onward. Soon Colvin got his chance. A blekbok, started by the tread of Stephanus’ horse, raced right across him at about forty-five yards, broadside on. Up went the gun, a second’s aim, and the pretty little animal turned a most beautiful somersault, and lay kicking convulsively, struck well forward in the head.

“Well done, well done! Maagtig kerel! but you can do something with shot!” cried Stephanus, approvingly.

Presently the metallic grating cackle of guinea-fowl was borne to their ears. They were near the banks of the Sneeuw River, where the mimosa cover and prickly pear klompjes were a favourite haunt of those splendid game birds. By dint of manoeuvring Colvin got right in among them, their attention being diverted by the other horseman. Up rose quite a number. Bang, bang! right and left, down they came. More rise. Bang, bang! One miss, one more bird down. Then they get up, more and more of them, by twos and threes, and by the time there are no more of them, and Colvin has picked up eight birds and is beginning to search for three more that have run, he is conscious that life can hold no improvement on the sheer ecstasy of that moment.

And then, when they return to the homestead in the roseate afterglow of the pearly evening—and the spoils are spread out:

“Five bucks, and eighteen birds,” cries Stephanus, counting the bag. “Not so bad for a mixed shoot—and only one bird gun among us. Aletta, this is an Englishman who can shoot.”

Colvin is conscious of enjoying this small triumph, as the girl’s bright face is turned towards him approvingly, and she utters a laughing, half-bantering congratulation.

“Where is Adrian?” he says, looking around.

“Adrian? Oh, he went long ago—soon after you did.”

Keenly watching her face, while not appearing to, he does not fail to notice the tinge of colour which comes into it as she answers. So Adrian has been trying his luck then; but, has he succeeded? How shall he find out? But why should he find out? What on earth can it matter to him?

Yet throughout the evening the one question he is continually asking himself, and trying to deduce an answer to, is—

Has he succeeded?

## Chapter Twelve.

## "The Only English Girl."

May Wenlock was in a temper.

She had got up in one, and throughout the morning her mother and brother had had the full benefit of it. Why she was in it she could not have told, at least with any degree of definitiveness. She was sick of home, she declared; sick of the farm, sick of the very sight of everything to do with it; sick of the eternal veldt. The mountains in the background were depressing, the wide-spreading Karroo plains more depressing still, although, since the rain, they had taken on a beautiful carpeting of flower-spangled green. She wanted to go away—to Port Elizabeth, or Johannesburg; in both of which towns she had relatives; anywhere, it didn't matter—anywhere for a change. Life was too deadly monotonous for anything.

Well, life on a farm in the far Karroo is not precisely a state of existence bristling with excitement, especially for the ornamental sex, debarred both by conventionality and inclination from the pleasures of the chase. But May was not really so hardly used as she chose to imagine. She was frequently away from home visiting, but of late, during almost the last year, she had not cared to go—had even refused invitations—wherein her brother saw another exemplification of feminine unreasonableness and caprice. Her mother, a woman and more worldly wise, was not so sure on that head.

"What's the row, anyhow?" said Frank, bluntly. "What do you want to scoot away for, and leave mother and me to entertain each other? Girls are always so beastly selfish."

"Girls selfish? Men, you mean," she flashed back. "Men are the most selfish creatures in existence. I hate them—hate them all."

"Why, only the other day you were saying that you had come round to the idea that it was much jollier in the country, and that you hated towns," went on Frank. "You've said it over and over again, and now—"

"Oh, go away, Frank, can't you, and leave her alone," said his mother. "Why do you take such a delight in teasing her when you see she's out of sorts?"

"Out of sorts, eh? That's what women always say when they're in a beastly bad temper. Oh, well, thank goodness I've no time for that sort of thing." And cramming his pipe he went out.

Frank was right, if somewhat inconsiderate. May was in a bad temper—a very bad temper indeed. Hardly had he gone than she flung on her white kapje, the same we first saw her in, and which became her so well, and went out too, but not after him. She went round among her fowl-houses, then strolled along the quince hedges to see if any of the hens had been laying out and in irregular places for the benefit of the egg-loving muishond, or similar vermin, but her mind some how was not in it. She gazed out over the surrounding veldt. A little cloud of dust away in the distance caused her to start and her eyes to dilate. But it passed away and was gone. It heralded the approach of nobody. The distant flying cackle of a cock koorhaan alarmed had the same effect, but no sign of life, far or near, save the slow movement of black ostriches grazing, and the occasional triple boom as they lifted up their voices. The sun, flaming down in the cloudless forenoon, caused the great expanse of plains to shimmer and glow with mirage-like effect, giving to each distant table-topped mountain an appearance of being suspended in mid-air.

Her eyes filled as she stood thus gazing, and two shining tears rolled down.

“Oh, I must get away from here,” she said to herself. “All this is weighing upon my nerves. I hate men—selfish, cruel, heartless wretches!”

She caught her voice, and was conscious that the pulsations of her heart had undergone an acceleration. Away in the distance a large dust-cloud was advancing, and with it the white tilt of a Cape cart.

“Only some tiresome Dutch people,” she said to herself, with a weary sigh. “I hope to goodness they won’t come here, that’s all.”

But her wish was doomed to non-fulfilment, for very soon the cart was seen to turn off the road that should have taken it by and to strike the branch track leading direct to the house. A flutter of feminine garments within it betokened the nature of the visit.

“May, where are you? May?” shouted Frank, in stentorian tones. “Oh, there you are. Here’s a whole crowd coming down into the drift. Looks like the De la Reys. They’ll be here in a minute.”

“I wish they’d be somewhere else in a minute, then,” muttered May to herself with a frown that quite transformed the pretty, winning face within the ample white kapje.

Frank’s surmise proved correct. The occupants of the cart were the three De la Rey girls and their brother Jan. As they drove up Mrs Wenlock came out in a flutter of excitement and welcome.

“How good of you to come over!” she said. “I am so glad to see you. We don’t get many visitors just now. Why, Aletta, I should hardly have known you. My, but you must have been away quite a long time. I suppose you have been having grand times down at the Cape. And how tall you have grown! Well, I always say it does a girl good to send her about among folks and to see a little of the world. Let’s see, I don’t think you and my May have ever met. She was not with us when we first came up.”

May, who had already been exchanging greetings with the other girls, now turned to this one.

“No, we haven’t,” she said. “How do you do, Miss De la Rey?” And as the two clasped hands each was mentally reading the other.

“What a figure!” thought May to herself. “How easily and with what unconscious grace she moves! I wish I had it instead of being fat and dumpy”—which she wasn’t—“and beautifully dressed, yet quite plainly. Well, she isn’t pretty, that’s one thing. Oh no, she isn’t in the least pretty.”

“So this is ‘the only English girl,’” Aletta was thinking. “She is pretty. Yes, mother was right, she is very, very pretty. Those blue eyes—like Table Bay when the sun shines on it at noon—I wish I had them. And the gold of her hair, and her beautiful colouring. I do believe old Tant’ Plessis must be right. Frank, too, has improved since I saw him. He has grown quite good-looking.”

The said Frank, having shouted ineffectually for one of the boys, presumably away on some other business, was helping Jan to outspan.

“Well, Jan,” said Mrs Wenlock as they all went inside, “you have been a long time bringing your sister over to see us.”

“Andrina and I have only just got back ourselves, Mrs Wenlock,” struck in Condaas. “Aletta has had a lot to do at home. And we have had old Tant’ Plessis there and ever so many people.”

“Ever so many people. Yes, I think you have had some people you would have been better without, if report speaks true,” replied Mrs Wenlock, shaking a finger at the speaker with a good-humoured laugh. “There are those who come a long way to breed sedition and discontent and differences among folks who are quite happy and contented. We quite thought you had deserted us nowadays because we were English.”

Mrs Wenlock, you see, was one of those good souls who pride themselves on speaking their minds—in this case an utterly tactless operation. A momentary frost lay upon the whole party. But the situation was relieved by the readiness of Aletta.

“Why, Mrs Wenlock, you are forgetting that there is some English blood in us,” she said.

“To be sure I was, child. And your father, although there is no English in him, he is a man for whom I have the greatest regard. He is the last man to listen to agitators and sedition-mongers—of that I am quite sure. How is he, by the way, and your mother?” They reassured her as to the perfect state of health and well-being enjoyed by both parents, which had the effect of leading the conversation away from a very delicate subject. May, the while, had been out of the room to see about getting tea ready, and now returned in time to hear the following:—

“Why don’t you bring your gun over, Frank?” Jan was saying. “Man, there is a fine lot of guinea-fowl down along the river—if Colvin has left any, that is. Maagtig, but he is fond of shooting birds. One klompje down on the draai by the white rock had nearly sixty birds in it, and now there are nine. Colvin has shot all the rest. Guinea-fowl are not easy to get at, you know. There are other klompjes, but he will do the same with them, so you had better be quick or there will be none left.”

“He must have been shooting a lot at your place, Jan.”

“He has. Rather. He comes over nearly every other day to have a shoot. Why, we shall soon have hardly anything left if he goes on at that rate. But the season will soon be over now. Not that we care much about season or no season if we want a buck to eat.”

“Tut-tut, Jan! What’s that you’re saying? And your father Field-cornet, too!” struck in Mrs Wenlock.

May, who was presiding at the tea-tray, hearing this apparently harmless dialogue, felt it to be just about all she could do to restrain the ugly frown which threatened to cloud her face. “He comes over nearly every other day,” Jan had said, yet he had not been near them for about three weeks, or close upon it—not, indeed, since that evening he and Frank had returned from Schalkburg together. He had never been away from them so long as that since he had been settled on his own farm, nor anything like it. What did it mean? What was the attraction? The sport? Well, the sport wasn’t bad at Spring Holt. No—a darker thought gripped her mind and heart, making her miserable. The time corresponded, within a day or two, to that of Aletta’s return. Well, what then? Surely she was tormenting herself unnecessarily. Surely she could hold her own against a Dutch girl—an ugly Dutch girl—she added spitefully to herself. But just then, as she was

discharging her duties of deputy hostess mechanically while thus thinking, the voice of the "ugly Dutch girl" broke in upon her broodings, with a remark addressed to herself.

"You have been in the Transvaal lately, I hear, Miss Wenlock?"

"Not quite lately; not for a year. I have some relations in Johannesburg, and was stopping with them."

"Ah! I have some there too. I may be going up there soon, but have never been. It is a very wonderful place, is it not?"

"Oh, yes. Miles ahead of any other in South Africa. It hasn't got the Sleepy Hollow sort of look all these other musty old places have. English capital and energy have put it in the forefront."

This was no sort of remark to make under the circumstances, and herein was another instance of May's lack of breeding which would now and again crop up. It may have been that she was stung by a new discovery which had been brought home to her with the first utterance. This "ugly Dutch girl" had a beautiful voice, soft, well modulated, thoroughly refined.

It was a time when people were wont to rave at and wrangle with each other over the rights and wrongs of the political situation then nearly at its most acute stage, on far less challenge than May's tone and words implied. This Dutch girl, however, did nothing of the kind. She went on talking pleasantly as though no such remark had been made—asking questions about the place under discussion, and seeming to take a vivid interest in the answers. Poor May felt very small, very inferior. She was honest enough to own to herself that she had transgressed against the laws of good breeding, and to admire the other's self-possession and ready tact, though, as constituting another attraction, she loved not the possessor of these qualities any the more.

Then Frank and Jan went out to smoke a pipe or two together, and talk shop, and about sport, and the latest rumours from the Transvaal—though this guardedly. The girls, left behind, were chatting, and looking at things, notably some English fashion papers which May had got out. Then they, too, took a stroll out to look at May's fowl-houses, and finally all met at dinner.

There was no lack of conversation. Aletta was telling them about her experiences at the capital—where none of her hearers, save Frank, had ever been—moved thereto by many questions from Mrs Wenlock, and all the good times she had been having—balls, and bicycle picnics, and Government House receptions, and dances on board one or other of

the warships at Simonstown. May, listening with vivid interest, almost forgot her ill-humour, only failing where she was reminded of it by envy. That was the sort of life her own soul hankered after, instead of being stuck away on a dismal up-country farm. That was life—this stagnation. Yet could she at that moment have been offered her choice, whether she would be there or here, she would have elected to remain where she was.

"I thought Cape Town a beastly place," declared Frank. "Nothing on earth to do there, and they wanted me to wear a bell-topper hat on Sunday."

Aletta broke into one of her whole-hearted laughs.

"That's the best definition I've ever heard," she said. "No, really, I shall have to tell it to some of them next time I am down there again—if ever I am."

"It's true, all the same," persisted Frank, looking remarkably pleased with himself and the consciousness of having said a good thing. But his mother told him he was talking nonsense, and proceeded with her cross-examination of Aletta. Had she seen the Governor, and was he like his portraits? and so on.

Oh, yes, she had seen him pretty often. Spoken to him? He had once or twice, in a kindly conventional way, spoken to her, but she was certain he would not know her from Eve if he were to see her again. There were so many people he had to talk to in the same way at officially social functions. But the point in this qualification was lost upon her questioner, whose honest middle-class soul swelled with a congenial respect for one who had actually talked with the Governor.

"Hallo! by George, there's someone coming!" exclaimed Frank, as the raucous coughs of the one decrepit cur whose acquaintance we have already made, together with a sound of hoofs, gave notice of the fact. "Wonder who it is?"

May looked up quickly, a whole world of eager expectancy, of forestalled disappointment in her glance. And as she did so she met the eyes of Aletta.

## Chapter Thirteen.

## Two Verdicts and some Rancour.

“Hallo, Colvin!” cried Frank, going out on the stoep. “Why, man, we had begun to think you were dead.”

“So?” said Colvin Kershaw, who was busy loosening the girths preparatory to off-saddling. “Whose cart is that, Frank? Looks like Stephanus’.”

“It is.”

“Is he here then?”

“No; only the girls.”

“Which of them?”

“All three.”

“Oh—. No, don’t have him put in the camp,” as a Hottentot came up to take the horse. “Just knee-halter him, and let him run. He can pick up enough round the house.”

As he entered, and greeted the girls, a subtle instinct told him that two of them were watching each other and him. May’s reception of him was somewhat brusque and rather too studiously off-handed. He read her face like the page of a book. She, keenly observant, noticed that he greeted the other three with the easy friendliness of people who know each other well, but without the faintest difference of tone or inflection in talking to each and all of them.

“Why, Mr Kershaw, we were thinking you were dead,” said Mrs Wenlock, in her cordial, breezy way. “It is a long time since we saw you last.”

“So Frank was saying, Mrs Wenlock. But I am not. Death has not given me a call yet.”

None there knew how very near truth their jesting words came—save one. One knew it, and with her Colvin, for the life of him, could not help exchanging a look. It was an exchange, and, swiftly as it flashed between them in its fulness of meaning, it did not go unobserved—by one.

“Hallo, Colvin, you’ve got your rifle along this time,” cried Frank, through the open window, who was examining the piece. “Why, I thought you never carried anything but a shot-gun down here.”

“I don’t generally. But I might be going up into the Wildschutsberg,” and again he brought his eyes round to those of Aletta. “Now and then you get a long shot at a reebok up there.”

“Why, this is the same old gun you had up in Matabeleland,” went on Frank, sighting the weapon and pointing and recovering it. “Nothing like these Lee-Metfords with the Martini block. By George, Miss De la Rey, how he used to make the niggers skip in the Matopos with this same pea-shooter!”

“Yes?” said Aletta, brightly, with simulated interest, but with a dire chill at her heart. What if this weapon should come to be pointed at others than dark-skinned barbarians, and that soon? Truth to tell for some occult reason the patriotic enthusiasm had cooled a little of late.

“Adrian had one of the new guns round at our place the other day,” said Jan. “A Mauser. He said it would shoot three miles. It is wonderful. I can hardly believe it.”

“Well, try a shot or two out of that, Jan,” said Colvin. “Only leave a few cartridges, in case I should come in for a good chance, riding along.”

Jan did—making some excellent practice, at ant-heaps scattered at varying distances over the veldt. Then his sisters declared that he had better see about inspanning, for it was time they were getting home.

“I shall have to be moving soon myself,” said Colvin. “I want to be in Schalkburg to-night.”

“In Schalkburg?” echoed Mrs Wenlock. “Why, you are in a hurry—and we haven’t seen you for such a time.”

“Yes; it’s a pity. But I have to do some business there first thing in the morning, so it’s as well to get there over-night.”

“I thought you said you might be going up to the Wildschutsberg,” said Aletta, with a spice of mischief. “Isn’t that rather a long way round?”

“It is rather. Only in the opposite direction. But I won’t go that way.”

And then, the cart being inspanned, they exchanged farewells. The handclasp between Colvin and Aletta was not one fraction more prolonged than that which he exchanged with the other two girls—if anything shorter. May, watching, could not but admit this, but did not know whether to feel relieved or not.

"So that is 'the only English girl'!" said Aletta to herself as they drove off. "Old Tant' Plessis was both right and wrong. They are not engaged, but still there is a sort of something between them, and that something is all, or nearly all, on her side. She would not make him happy, either—or be happy with him. She is pretty, very pretty, but common. She is gusty-tempered, has no self-command, and would be horribly jealous. No. She could never make him happy."

Those whom she had left, however, were at that very moment formulating their opinions upon her, but aloud.

"What a nice girl Aletta has grown into!" Mrs Wenlock was saying. "She used to be shy and awkward, and nothing to look at, before she went away, and now she's so bright, and smart, and stylish, and almost pretty. It's wonderful what her stay at Cape Town has done for her."

"I don't think she's pretty at all," said May decisively. "I call her ugly."

"No, I'll be hanged if she's ugly," said Frank.

"No, indeed," agreed his mother; "look what pretty hair she has, and pretty hands, and then her manner is so delightful. And there is such a stylish look about her, too! Don't you agree with me, Mr Kershaw?"

"Yes; I do," was the reply, made as evenly as though the subject under discussion had been Andrina or Condaas, or any other girl in the district.

"Well, I think she's a horrid girl," persisted May. "Style, indeed? What you call style, I call 'side.' She puts on a kind of condescending, talk-down-to-you sort of manner. These Dutch girls," with withering emphasis on the national adjective, "are that way. They go away from home for a little and come back as stuck-up as they can be. That one is too grand for anything—in her own estimation. A horrid, stuck-up thing."

Colvin, listening, winced. The idea expressed, the very wording of its expression, grated upon him horribly, apart from the identity of the subject thereof. In such wise would May from time to time lapse, and become, as Aletta had put it to herself, "common."

He made no comment upon her vehement and ill-natured dictum, knowing perfectly well that it was uttered quite as much as a challenge to himself as to relieve the utterer's feelings; and he was far too old and experienced to be drawn by any such transparent device. But as they re-entered the sitting-room the jarring effect of the words was intensified, bringing back in vivid contrast the last time he was there; that evening when he had been so near turning the most momentous corner which could meet him within the career of life. He had not turned it. A warning hand had, so to speak, been held up. This girl—he could see her as she was then, in her sweet alluring beauty, soft-voiced, appealing. He could see her now, hard-eyed, vindictive, and expressing herself in a manner that savoured of the wash-tub. What a near thing it had been—how narrow his escape!

He would have been tied fast, bound hand and foot. Even now there was a certain length of loose coil around him, which would need some care and judgment entirely to cast off. Still there was no hard-and-fast bond, and looking backward over the events of the past three weeks or so, he felt lost in thankfulness because of the trivial, fortuitous incident which had availed to stay his tongue when it had so nearly spoken.

"You are not particularly lively, after all this time, Colvin."

He started, and put down the paper he had pretended to read, while the above reflections were coursing through his brain. They were alone together in the room, he and May. Frank, divested of his coat and waistcoat, could be seen in the distance doing odd jobs, and Mrs Wenlock had withdrawn for an afternoon nap. Her visitors, she declared, although dear girls, had tired her.

"No, I'm afraid I'm not," he said. "I believe I'm tired. Well, let's talk."

Something in the words brought back that last evening they were thus alone together. The recollection softened her, but only for a moment.

"I can imagine it seems dull now that your Dutch friends are gone," she began, in a crisp, gunpowdery way which was more than a declaration of war. It was in fact the firing of the first shell.

"Oh, bother it, May, why will you harp on that insane prejudice of nationality?" he expostulated, but quite good-humouredly, purposely ignoring her real drift. "A good sort is a good sort, no matter what his or her nationality. And I think you'll allow that old Stephanus and his crowd come under that heading."

“So you seem to think,” was the acid reply. “You have been there a good deal of late, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I like them very much, and the shoot is choice.” And then he went on to tell her about the bags he had made, and old Tant’ Plessis and her absurd perversities, and the ridiculous muddle the old woman had made between his name and that of the sixteenth-century Reformer. His object was to keep her attention away from personalities. But that object she saw through.

“You were not so fond of them three or four weeks ago,” she said, half turned away from him, and beginning to speak quickly, while the sea-blue eyes filled. “That is just the time that girl has been back. Goodness! I never thought to see you—you—running after an ugly Dutch girl.”

Every word grated upon Colvin’s mind—grated intensely, so much so indeed as to leave no room for anger, only disgust and disillusionment. At that moment, too, there flashed vividly through his mind a vision of the speaker, as contrasted with this “ugly Dutch girl” here in this very room but a few minutes ago, and the contrast was all in favour of the latter—yes, a hundred times over in her favour, he told himself. And now this one was going to make a scene; so much was evident. She was crudely, unsophisticatedly jealous, and had no self-control whatever.

Heavens! what an escape he had had!

“See here, May,” he said. “That sort of remark is not to my liking at all. It is—well, exceedingly unpleasant, and really I don’t care about listening to all this. I am responsible to nobody for my actions, remember, and there is not one living soul who has the slightest right or title to call me to account for anything I do or don’t do. And I am a little too old to begin to obey orders now. So if you will kindly give up abusing people I like, and with whom I happen to be very friendly, I shall be grateful. I don’t like to hear it, and it doesn’t come well from you.”

But the girl made no answer. She had dropped her face into her hands, and was silently sobbing. He, watching her, was softened directly. His first impulse was to take her in his arms and strive to comfort her. He still had a very weak place for her, although the scales had fallen from his eyes, owing to two causes. But an instinct of prudence and a great deal of cynicism born of experience rose up to restrain him. He had gone through this sort of thing before. He had seen women utterly miserable and heart-broken seemingly, on his account, as they said, meaning it, too, at the time; but six months or a year thence had found them laughing in his face, if not playing the same game with

somebody else; but he himself had not taken them seriously, wherefore it didn't matter. Yet it was all part of an education, and of what use was an education save to be applied?

"Don't cry like that, little one," he said gently. "Why should we say hard things to each other, you and I? We never used to."

The gentle tone melted her at once. She dropped her hands. All the hardness had gone out of her face, and the sea-blue eyes were limpid and tender and winning.

"No, we used not. I have become very bad-tempered—very quarrelsome. But—oh, Colvin, I am so tired of life—of life here. It gets upon my nerves, I think. And I have hardly any friends, and you—you the greatest of them all, hardly seem to care for me—for us—now. I—we—never see you in these days, and—I feel it somehow."

Colvin's heart smote him. He need not have stayed away so long and so markedly, but there was a reason, and he had acted with the best intentions. Wherein he had blundered, as people invariably do when they suffer their actions to be guided by such tissue-paper motives, instead of by the hard and safe rule of judiciousness, expediency, and knowledge of human nature.

"Poor little girl! You must not run away with all those ideas," he said. "And, you are flattering me. Well, I will come over again soon, and have a talk, but I must go now. There, will that do?"

He was talking to her quite gently, quite soothingly, just as he used to do, and the effect was wonderful. All the dejection, the sullenness, disappeared from her face, dispelled by a bright, almost happy smile.

"Good-bye, then," she said. "I don't think I'll come and see you start this time. Good-bye, dear."

Her eyes shone soft and dewy in the upturned face. Her lips were raised invitingly. It was not in mortal man to refuse them, however stern rectitude under the circumstances might dictate such a course. This one did not refuse them.

"Good-bye, my darling!" she breathed into his ear, in a voice so barely audible as to be almost inarticulate. And as he left her and went out to find his horse and see about saddling up, it was with a vague misgiving that the loose coil, to which he had made allusion in his own mind, had, within the last few moments, very perceptibly tightened.

We made use just above of the expression “under the circumstances.” The “circumstances” were, that by that time this cautious, and cynical and experienced man of the world was deeply, devotedly, and entirely in love with Aletta De la Rey.

## Chapter Fourteen.

## Jelf—Civil Commissioner.

Nicholas Andrew Jelf was Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate for the town and division of Schalkburg.

In person he was a tall, middle-aged, rather good-looking man, with dark hair, and a grizzled, well-trimmed moustache, and whose general appearance fostered an idea which constituted one of his favourite weaknesses—that he resembled a retired military man. When mistaken for such openly, he positively beamed; and more than one shrewd rogue got the benefit of the doubt, or obtained material mitigation of the penalty due to his misdeeds, by appealing, with well-feigned ignorance, to the occupant of the Bench as "Colonel." By disposition he was easy-going and good-natured enough, and bore the reputation among his brother Civil servants of being something of a duffer.

By these the magistracy of Schalkburg was regarded as anything but a plum. It was very remote, the district large, and peopled almost entirely by Dutch farmers. The town itself was a great many miles from the nearest railway station; moreover, it was a dull little hole, with the limited ideas and pettifogging interests common to up-country townships. It boasted a large Dutch Reformed church—an unsightly, whitewashed parallelogram with staring, weather-beaten windows—item about a dozen stores, a branch of the Standard Bank, and two "hotels," designed to afford board and lodging, of a kind, to such of the storekeepers' clerks or bank clerks—to whom means, or inclination or opportunity, denied the advantages and felicities of the connubial state, for a stranger was an exceeding rarity. Half of its houses were untenanted, save for a few days on the occasion of the quarterly Nachtmaal (The Lord's Supper) when the township would be filled with a great multitude of Boers and their families from far and near, those who did not own or hire houses, camping with their waggons on the town commonage. But it boasted no natural beauty to speak of, just dumped down, as it were, on a wide, flat plain. Some few of the houses had an erf or two of garden ground attached, which in the spring constituted by contrast a pleasing spot of green amid the prevailing red dust, but for the rest the impression conveyed was that of a sun-baked, wind-swept, utterly depressing sort of place.

Nicholas Andrew Jelf was seated at his office table amid a pile of papers, and his countenance wore a very worried expression indeed. The post had just been delivered, and the contents of the bag had consisted of a greater crop than usual of Government circulars, eke requests for returns, as it seemed, upon every subject under heaven. Moreover, the newspapers, through which he had glanced hurriedly, were mainly remarkable for the number and conspicuousness of their scare headlines. Sensation was

the order of the day, and out of the chances of a rupture with the two Republics the canny editor managed to suck no small advantage. But poor Mr Jelf could lay to himself no such consolation. His thoughts were for his already large and still increasing family, and the ruinous hole it would make in the by no means extravagant pay of a Civil servant were he obliged to send it away to a safer locality, as he greatly feared he ought to lose no time in doing.

He turned to his correspondence. The Government desired to be informed of this—or the member for Slaapdorp had moved for a return of that—or Civil Commissioners were requested to obtain the opinion of the leading farmers of their divisions as to how far rinderpest microbes were likely to affect donkeys, given certain conditions of temperature and climate... and nearly a dozen more of like practical utility. Mr Jelf threw down the papers with a grunt of disgust and swore mildly to himself.

"They seem to think a Civil Commissioner must be a whole damned walking 'Encyclopaedia Britannica,'" he growled. "What's this? More of the same stuff, I suppose."

But, as he read, his attention became more riveted and his face anxious and graver. For the official communication, marked "Confidential," was one urgently requesting information as to the tone and disposition of the Dutch farmers in his division as bearing upon the present state of affairs, and desiring a full and circumstantial report at the very earliest opportunity. The effect of this was to deepen the worried look upon his face and to cause him to swear a little more. Just then a tap came at the door, and his clerk entered.

"Anything by the post that wants seeing to, sir?"

"Anything? I should think so. Just look at all this, Morkel," pointing to the heap of stuff upon the table.

Morkel did look at it—looked somewhat blue, moreover. He was fond of sport and had intended to ask for a day or two's leave to join a buck hunt on one of the farms, and was fully capable of grasping the amount of work all that confounded correspondence was going to entail. He was a well-set-up, good-looking young fellow of five and twenty, very proud of his fair proportions and waxed moustache and somewhat dandified attire; for there were three or four passable-looking girls in Schalkburg, and the Civil Commissioner's clerk was Somebody in the place.

"One would think, at such a time as this, Government would have plenty to do without off-loading all these insane circulars upon us," went on his chief, irritably. "It isn't as if

the things they want to know were of any practical use—they might as well move for a return of the number of buttons on every prisoner's breeches over at the gaol as some of the things they do ask, but we've got to humour them. By the way, though, there's one thing they want to know that has a practical side, and that ought to be looked after by a special department manufactured for this emergency. We have quite enough to do without going on the stump, so to say. Look at this."

He handed the letter marked "Confidential" to his subordinate. The latter read it through carefully, and as he did so he saw light. He thought he was going to get his shoot after all, and a good deal more of it than he had at first hoped for.

"The thing is so unreasonable," went on Mr Jelf. "Every mortal fad sprung on the House by some tin-pot country member, some retired canteen-keeper and proportionately consequential, is off-loaded on the Civil Commissioner. The Civil Commissioner is requested to do this, and the Civil Commissioner is desired to supply information upon that—as if we hadn't quite enough to do with our financial and judicial duties. Why the deuce can't Government have its own Secret Service department as Oom Paul is supposed to have?"

Morkel listened sympathetically, as he always did when his chief indulged in a grumble. The two were on very good terms. Jelf had a liking for his subordinate, who officially was smart and well up to his work, and socially was the only man in the place with whom he could associate on even terms, except the District Surgeon, who was a trifle too fond of his glass, and inclined to be dictatorial. Morkel, for his part, reciprocated the liking. His chief was easy-going, and good-natured in the matter of leave officially, and socially took a sort of paternal and friendly interest in him. These two Civil servants, therefore, got on admirably together.

"Well, the thing has got to be done," went on Jelf, "and the only way to find out Dutch feeling is to go around among the Dutch. I haven't the time to do it, and if I had it wouldn't help, because they'd all shut up like oysters before me. But with you it would be different, Morkel. They'd look upon you as one of themselves." He little thought how hard he was stamping on the corns of his subordinate; the fact being that, although born of Dutch parentage on either side, Morkel's weakness was to imagine himself thoroughly and intensely English. "You would have to affect Boer sympathies, though, and we know that under the present Ministry that doesn't damage a Civil servant at headquarters, eh? What do you think of the idea?"

"It's a first-rate one, sir. I might go around as if on a sort of wandering shoot."

“Yes. Take your gun with you. That’ll give colour to the affair. You can have my trap and horses, only spare the springs all you can in going through some of those bad drifts. You’d better take a week of it. Harvey can do a lot of your work for you. He’s almost too good a man for a chief constable. You’d better get as far up into the Wildschutsberg part as you can; they say the Boers up that way are the worst—especially since that firebrand, Andries Botma, has been his rounds. Look up Kershaw too; they say the fellow is three parts Boer in his sympathies. You might be able to get something out of him.”

A knock at the door and the Court constable, being bidden to enter, announced that Mynheer Stephanus De la Rey wanted to see the Civil Commissioner.

“The very man,” exclaimed the latter. “You must get to his farm, Morkel. You’re sure to hear something there. Show him in, Hendrik.”

Stephanus entered, and as he did so Morkel went out, laden with the circulars that needed attention.

Left alone with the magistrate, Stephanus looked a trifle ill-at-ease. His frank geniality seemed to have left him as he replied to that official’s inquiries after his family and concerns wherewith the Boer is wont to preface any and every interview if on anything like friendly terms with his interlocutor. Then he came to the point. He wished to resign his field-cornetcy.

Jelf looked annoyed, and felt it too. What was the reason, he asked. A reliable, influential man like Stephanus was just the man for the office. He would be hard to replace. Would he not reconsider his decision?

But Stephanus was firm; the fact being that since he had become converted to the “patriot” cause he was too honest to continue holding a post under the British Government, honorary as such might be. He did not, however, desire to say as much to the Government representative before him.

But the latter saw through his constraint, and went straight to the root of the thing. He was irritated at the obstinacy, as he called it, of this Boer, and the latter, to his amazement and indignation, found himself being roundly lectured. The Civil Commissioner had heard reports of disaffection among some of the farmers—notably those in the Wildschutsberg district, but he had never expected to find among the disloyal a man so universally respected as the one before him, and much more to the same effect Stephanus, however, kept both his temper and his dignity.

If that was the way the representative of the Government regarded him, he replied, all the more reason why he should adhere to his original resolve, and resign the field-cornetcy in favour of somebody who would be more acceptable. Would Mynheer kindly receive his formal resignation?

Yes, Mynheer would, in that case. But the farewell greeting between the two was stiff and unfriendly.

Left alone, Jelf felt rather small. He had failed in judiciousness, in tact, and he knew it. He had rubbed his interviewer the wrong way, just at a time when it was essential to keep such a man well disposed and friendly. At any rate, here was one item for his report. If Stephanus De la Rey was disaffected, why, then, the whole of the Wildschutsberg district must be a hotbed of seething sedition.

Thus he expressed matters to his subordinate, as, Stephanus having departed, he called Morkel in to talk over their plan.

“He has all but come round, sir,” said the latter. “I talked him over a good deal, and his is one of the places I’m to go to. He won’t give way about the field-cornetcy, though.”

“Oh, well, we must find somebody else, I suppose. They are all rebels at heart, I believe, and he’s as great a rebel as any. Yes? Come in.”

Again the Court constable entered.

“Mynheer Grobbelaar wishes to see you, sir.”

“Grobbelaar? Is it Jan Grobbelaar?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Show him in. This is getting warm, Morkel. Another damned Field-cornet. I suppose he wants to resign now.”

Swaart Jan entered, his projecting buck-teeth more prominent than ever in an oily grin, as he shook hands with the two officials. Jelf’s manner was short, and he wasted no time in preliminaries.

“Well, Mynheer Grobbelaar, and what can I do for you?”

“Nay, Mynheer, thank you. I have not called on business; just to make a little friendly visit.”

“Oh, not on business?” said the magistrate, greatly relieved in his own mind, yet wishing his visitor at the devil, bothering in like that during office hours. But he changed his mind when the Boer explained that he had been shooting a few springbuck lately, and he had brought in a little matter of a saddle and a couple of haunches, which Mrs Jelf might find good for roasting. It was from a young buck, and would eat well—he went on, in his shambling, diffident way.

Jelf thawed at once, and thanked his visitor. Here was another opportunity of getting at the state of Dutch feeling; and by way of preliminary he told the other about Stephanus’ resignation, adding, with a laugh:

“I thought you had come to resign too, Mynheer Grobbelaar.”

But the little man deprecated the possibility of any such idea having entered his head. It was a pity Stephanus had resigned, though. In answer to other questions—yes, there was some foolish talk among the Boers around him, but it was only talk, and they were young men. The Patriot? Oh, yes, he had visited some of them, but only on a flying visit. Held meetings? Oh, no—and here Swaart Jan’s hands went up in pious horror. What did Mynheer think of him, and those around him, to imagine that he, or they, would countenance such a thing for a single moment?

Jelf felt intensely relieved. Here was loyalty at last, anyhow—another item for his report. And he and his visitor parted with the most cordial of farewells; and Field-cornet Jan Marthinus Grobbelaar, alias Swaart Jan, went out grinning till his tusks nearly came below the level of his chin, as he thought of the cases of Mauser rifles snugly stored in a safe recess within his house, and the ammunition, a quantity sufficient to blow up half the mountain, which was stowed away in a cleft of an adjacent krantz, conveyed and deposited thither by authority of no permit given under the hand of Nicholas Andrew Jelf, Resident Magistrate.

Here was loyalty at last, anyhow! as that astute official had put it to himself.

## Chapter Fifteen.

## Solution.

How had it all come about? What was there in this girl that had seized and held his mind—his every thought—ever since he had first set eyes on her, all unexpectedly, that evening when he had come in, wet and dripping, having barely escaped with his life? Colvin Kershaw, putting the question to himself twenty times a day, could find no definite answer to it.

No definite answer—no. Therein lay all the charm surrounding Aletta. It was so indefinite. From the moment he had first beheld her the charm had taken hold upon him. He had been unconsciously stirred by her presence, her personality. Yet it was no case of love at first sight. A strange, potent weaving of the spell had been on him then, and, gradual in its development, had enchained him and now held him fast.

Day after day in his solitary dwelling he had recognised it, and analysed it, and striven with its influence, yet had never attempted to throw it off—had never shrunk instinctively from the weaving of its coils around him. It was not born of solitude, as perhaps that other coil, from which he would heartily fain be now entirely and conscientiously free, had been. No matter under what circumstances, or in what crowd they had met, he realised that the result would have been the same; that the spell would still have been woven just the same.

He thought upon the conditions of life, and how such are apt to focus themselves into a very small groove—the groove in which one happens, for the time being, to run. Might it not be that the circumscribed area into which life had resolved itself with him of late had affected his judgment, and led him to take a magnified, a vital view of that which, looked at from the outside world, would have struck him as a passing fancy, and untenable save as such? Judgment, reason, heart, alike cried out to the contrary, and cried aloud.

He might leave this remote habitation on the High Veldt, this region outwardly so unattractive to the casual passer-through with a mind absorbed by the state of the share market in Johannesburg or London, but so enriveting to those who make it their home. He might return to the world he knew so well; might do so to-morrow, without inconvenience or loss. What then? He would merely be measuring the length of his chain, or, if he succeeded in breaking it, would be relinquishing the pearl of great price which he had found here in a far corner of the earth when least expecting any such marvellous discovery, any such unspeakable blessing to be obtained by mortal man.

For so he had come to regard it. Yes, the symptoms this time were there. Nothing was wanting to them now. He had been under the delusion that that which they had represented was, for him, a thing of the past, and in his solitary life and unconscious craving for sympathy and companionship—yes, and even for love, had almost acted upon that idea. But for a timely diversion he would so have acted. Now he could hardly formulate to himself a sufficiency of gratitude to Heaven, or circumstances, or whatever it might be, that he had not.

The narrowness of his escape he realised with a mental shudder. What if this strange new experience, opening as it did such an irradiating vista of possibilities, had come upon him a day too late, had discovered him bound—bound, too, by a chain he well knew there would be no loosening once its links enfolded him? His usual luck had stood him in good stead once more, and the thought suggested another. Would that luck continue?

Would it? It should. He would soon put it to the test. He went over in his mind the whole period of his acquaintanceship with Aletta. It was short enough in actual fact—only a matter of weeks, yet viewed by the aspect of the change it had wrought it seemed a lifetime. He recalled how he had first beheld her, and indeed many a time since, bright, laughing, infecting everyone, however unconsciously, with the warmth of her sunny light-heartedness. No outcome was this either of a shallow unthinking temperament. She could be serious enough on occasions, as he had more than once observed during their many talks together, that, too, with a quick sympathy which pointed to a rich depth of mind. He reviewed her relationship towards her own people, which, as an intimate friend of the house, he had enjoyed every opportunity of observing, and here again he found no flaw. It was clear that the whole family came little short of worshipping her, and through this ordeal too she had come utterly unspoiled. The idea brought back the recollection of the sort of good-humoured, faintly contemptuous indulgence with which he had listened to the singing of her praises by one or other of its members, what time her personality represented to him simply the original of those unprepossessing portraits which adorned the sitting-room; and he acknowledged that the laugh now was completely turned against himself.

Then his thoughts took a new vein, and he seemed to hear the comments of those among whom he had sometime moved— “Colvin Kershaw? Oh yes. Married some farm girl out in Africa and turned Boer, didn’t he?” and more to the same effect, uttered in a languid, semi-pitying tone by this or that unit of a society whose shibboleth was the mystical word “smart,” a society he had been in but not of. Well, so be it. Let them drawl out their banal inanities. In this case he hoped they would do so with reason.

Hoped? For he was not sure, far from it; and herein lay one of the “symptoms,” Not that he would have loved Aletta one iota the less had he been sure. He was not one of those to whom the joy of possession is measured by the excitement and uncertainty of pursuit; and there are some of whom this holds good, however difficult it may be to persuade, at any rate the ornamental sex, that such can possibly be the case. On the contrary, he would feel grateful to one who should spare him the throes and doubts calculated to upset even an ordinarily well-balanced mind under the circumstances, and proportionately appreciative. But whatever of diffidence or anxiety might take hold upon his own mind, Colvin Kershaw was not the man to display it in the presence of its first cause. The cringing, adoring, beseeching suitor of not so very old-fashioned fiction struck him as somewhat contemptible, and as of necessity so appearing to the object of his addresses, no matter how much she might really care for him at heart. He must run his chance to win or lose, and if he lost, take it standing. There was none of the ad misericordiam, wildly pleading element about him.

“Pas op, Baas! The bird!”

The words, emanating from his henchman, Gert Bondelzwart, brought him down to earth again; for the occupation in which he had been engaged during the above reverie was the prosaic one of attending to his daily business, which in this case consisted in going round the ostrich camps and inspecting such nests as he knew of, or discovering indications of prospective ones. To a certain extent mechanical and routine, it was not incompatible with reflection upon other matters. Now he turned to behold a huge cock ostrich bearing down upon him with hostility and aggressiveness writ large all over its truculent personality.

“Here, Gert. Give me the tack!” he said. “That old brute is properly kwaai.”

Now the cock ostrich resembles the aggressive and nagging human female, in that the respective weakness of either protects it, though differing, in that in the first instance the said weakness may be read as “value” and, in the second, proportionately the reverse. For a creature of its size and power for mischief there is no living thing more easy to kill or disable than an ostrich, wherein again comes another diametrical difference. A quick, powerful down-stroke or two with the sharp-pointed toe may badly injure a man or even kill him, if surprised in the open by the ferocious biped, tenfold more combative and formidable during the nesting season. And this one, which now came for its lawful owner, looked formidable indeed, towering up to its great height, the feathers round the base of its neck bristling at right angles, and flicking its jet-black wings viciously. It was a grand bird, whose pink shins and beak, and flaming, savage eye proclaimed it in full season, as it charged forward, hissing like an infuriated snake.

Colvin grasped the long, tough mimosa bough not a moment too soon. Standing firm yet lightly, so as to be able to spring aside if necessary, he met the onrush in the only way to meet it. The sharp pricking of the clusters of spiky thorns met the savage bird full in the head and neck, but chiefly the head, forcing it to shut its eyes. For a moment it danced in powerless and blinded pain, then backed, staggering wildly. Forward again it hurled itself, emitting an appalling hiss, again to meet that inexorable cluster of thorny spikes. In blind rage it shot out a terrible kick, which its human opponent deftly avoided, the while holding his thorn tack high enough to avoid having it struck from his hand—a precaution many a tyro in the ways of the gentle ostrich has been known to forget, to his cost. Again it charged, once more only to find itself forced to shut its eyes and stagger back giddily. Then it came to the conclusion that it had had enough.

“I think he will leave us alone, so long, Gert,” said Colvin, panting somewhat from the exertion and excitement, for even the thorn-tack means of defence requires some skill and physical effort to wield with effect against a full-grown and thoroughly savage male ostrich.

“Ja, Baas. He is real schelm,” returned Gert, who had been standing behind his master throughout the tussle. “But he has had enough.”

It seemed so. The defeated monster, baulked and cowed, sullenly withdrew, and, shambling off, promptly encountered a weaker rival in the shape of one of his own kind, which he incontinently went for, and consoled himself for his own rout by rushing his fleeing inferior all over the camp, and then, gaining the wire fence, went down on his haunches, and wobbled his silly head and fluttered his silly wings in futile challenge to another cock-bird on the further side of that obstruction, whose attention had been attracted by the row, and who was coming down to see what it was all about.

“Now to look at that jackal-trap, Gert. Ah, here it is—and, sure enough, here’s Mr Jack.”

There came into view an iron trap, which, when set, had been level with the ground, deftly covered with loose earth, and baited with half a hare. It was placed in the thick of a bush so as to be inaccessible to ostriches, to protect whom it was there, and as they came up, a jackal, securely caught by the forelegs, struggled wildly to get free, snarling in fear and pain, and displaying all its white teeth.

“Poor little brute,” said Colvin. “Here, Gert, give it a whack on the head with your kerrie and send it to sleep. Toen! look sharp.

“That’s the worst of these infernal traps,” he went on, as a well-directed blow terminated the destructive little marauder’s hopes and fears. “But it has got to be, or we shouldn’t have an egg left.”

“Ja, Baas. That is quite true,” assented the Griqua, to whose innermost mind, reflected through those of generations of barbarian ancestry, the idea of feeling pity for a trapped animal, and vermin at that, represented something akin to sheer imbecility.

“Gert,” said Colvin, as they got outside the ostrich camps, “get up one of the shooting-horses—Punch will do—and saddle him up. I am going over to Ratels Hoek.”

“Punch, sir? Not Aasvogel?”

“Jou eselkop! Did I not say a shooting-horse? Aasvogel would run to the devil before if he heard a shot. He’d run further now since the joke up yonder with Gideon Roux.”

“Ja, sir. That is true”; and the Griqua went away chuckling. He had been poking sly fun at his master, in that Aasvogel was by far the showiest horse in the place. Gert had been putting two and two together. For about once a week that his master had gone over to Ratels Hoek formerly, now he went thither at least twice or three times. Of course it could only be with one object, and with that object no Boer would have thought of riding any other than his showiest horse. Wherefore Gert had suggested Aasvogel.

Likewise, no Boer would have thought of riding forth on such an errand without getting himself up with much care and all the resources at his disposal. Colvin, needless perhaps to say, did nothing of the kind. He got into a clean and serviceable shooting-suit, and with his favourite shot-gun, a sufficiency of cartridges, and a few trifling necessaries in a saddle-bag, he was ready.

Just then his housekeeper, Katrina, Gert’s wife, met him in the door with a note. It had just been brought, she said. Baas Wenlock’s boy was waiting for an answer.

He opened the note. It was in May’s handwriting, wanting to know if he would come over and spend Sunday with them. What should he reply? This was Friday; yet, one way or the other, he was under no doubt whatever that in forty-eight hours he would not be precisely inclined to put in the day at Spring Holt—no—no matter how things went. Yet to refuse would seem unfriendly, and, viewed from one aspect, somewhat brutal. So he left the matter open, pleading hurry in his reply.

Then as he passed out of his door a chill feeling came over him. How would he re-enter it—elate, happy, or—only to calculate how soon he could make arrangements for leaving it altogether, for shutting down this volume of the book of his life? And with a sense of darkling superstition upon him the delivery of that message as he passed the threshold seemed to sound a note of ill augury.

He was destined to meet with another such. When nearly half-way on his ride he came in sight of another horseman cantering along the flat at some distance off, travelling towards him. A few minutes more and he made out Adrian De la Rey.

It was rather a nuisance, he decided. He did not want to meet Adrian just then. Adrian was too addicted to making himself disagreeable in these days. Formerly they had been very friendly, but now, since Adrian had come upon them that morning in the garden, his manner had changed. It had displayed towards Colvin, upon such occasions as they had met, a brusqueness akin to rudeness.

“Daag! Adrian!” cried the latter, reining in.

“Daag!” answered the young Boer gruffly, without reining in, and continuing his way.

“You want a lesson in manners, my young friend,” said Colvin to himself, feeling excusably nettled. “Well, well!” he added. “The poor devil’s jealous, and of course hates me like poison. I suppose I should do the same.”

Thus lightly did he pass it off. He would not have done so perhaps could he at that moment have seen the other’s face, have read the other’s mind. A savage scowl clouded the former, black and deadly hatred seethed through the latter.

“Wait a bit, you verdomde rooinek!” snarled the Boer to himself. “Your days are told. They may be counted by weeks now, and not many of them. These accursed English—is it not enough that they rule our land and treat us like Kafirs, without coming between us and those we love? Their time of reckoning will be here directly—and of this one too. He little knows—he little knows, that he will be dead in a few weeks. No-no!”

He said truly. The object of this murderous though not altogether unjustifiable hatred was holding on his way through the sweet golden sunshine, little thinking of the dread ordeal of blood and horror through which he, and some of those with whom his fate was bound up, were soon—and very soon—to pass.

## Chapter Sixteen.

## "Of Great Price."

That visit to the Wenlocks had been productive of result in more directions than one; still, why should it have affected Aletta De la Rey of all people? Yet affect her it did, inasmuch as, after it, she became more happy and light-hearted than ever.

Little had she thought at the time of carelessly suggesting the idea to her mother that such could possibly be the result. But weeks had gone by since the suggestion was made, and the lapse of weeks has sometimes a curious way of bringing about changes and developments by no means to be foreseen by those most concerned therein; which for present purposes may be taken to mean that she and Colvin Kershaw had by this time seen a great deal of each other. And this period Aletta, for her part, looked back upon with vivid and unalloyed pleasure.

He had been a great deal at Ratels Hoek during that time, so much so as to lay her open to considerable chaff at the hands of her sisters, notably at those of Condaas, who declared that it was "a case," in that he had never been known to favour them with anything like so much of his company before. Even old Tant' Plessis had remarked upon it, appending by way of rider the query as to when he was going to marry Wenlock's sister, "the only English girl" and so forth, which joke had become a standing one by then. But Aletta could afford to laugh at it now, in the most whole-souled manner, which development was among the results of that memorable visit.

All their talks together—now grave, now semi-serious, now wholly gay—she delighted to dwell upon. This man was entirely outside her previous experience. Nothing he said ever jarred, even in the slightest degree. There was no question they discussed together to which he could not find a perfectly intelligible side, even if differing; no show of impatience or of humouring her; everything treated from a philosophical, well-thought-out point of view. Or, if the topic were of lighter import, the exact point where the humour came in would somehow strike them simultaneously. There was a subtle vein of sympathy between them, and to dwell upon it thrilled her with a blissful and exquisite delight.

Other considerations apart, it was intensely flattering, the more so as she realised that the attitude was genuine. She had met with plenty of attention during her absence from home, but her head had not been in the least turned thereby. But of all the attention she had met, none had been so grateful, so satisfying, and indeed so sweet as this. Sometimes, in fact, she would wonder if she were not over-estimating its burden, but the

momentary misgiving would be quenched. Tone, glance, everything told her that such was not the case.

Yet what could he see in her, to take so much pleasure in talking with her, he who had seen so much of the world what time she herself was running about in short frocks, not so very long able to talk distinctly? How could he give so much consideration to her crude ideas—acquired and fostered, she supposed, during a not very long sojourn in a fifth-rate capital—he who had seen all the mighty capitals of both worlds, and knew some of them intimately? Personally, too, where did the attraction lie? She was not even pretty, like her sister Andrina, or May Wenlock. Yet, comparing herself with the latter, a smile spread over her face, rippling out into a low, whole-hearted laugh, all alone as she was.

Now the above reflections constituted just about as full and complete a tribute as Aletta De la Rey could have given to any man. She had no poorer an opinion of herself than had other girls of her quality and circumstance. She was aware—normally, that is—that what she lacked in attractiveness in one direction was counterbalanced by different advantages in another. Yet now she found herself magnifying her defects, and almost entirely losing sight of their compensations. Of a truth here too were "symptoms."

Thus meditating, not quite for the first time, Aletta strolled along through the willows by the river bed—much more bed than "river" now, although a faint trickle had kept some of the deeper reaches fairly supplied. She was given to an occasional solitary stroll. It was good for the individual to retire sometimes into private life, was her explanation. But the other girls put—or pretended to put—a different construction upon it. They declared mischievously that there was something on between her and somebody in Cape Town, and she wanted to go and have a good think about him. She, for her part, only laughed, and let them think so if they wanted to. But they humoured her and her inclinations all the same, for, as we said elsewhere, Aletta occupied a sort of metaphorical pedestal within her own family circle.

It was a lovely morning—blue and golden and cloudless. A mirage-like shimmer arose from the veldt, and the sunlight slanted upon the facets of near rock-walls engirdling turret-shaped cone, or flat-topped mount, as though sweeping over patches of gems. A "kok-a-viek," the yellow African thrush, was calling to his mate in his melodious triple hoot among the willows hard by, and the sounds of workaday life—mellowed by distance—the lowing of cattle, and the shout of native voices, were borne to the girl's ears as she stood there, revelling, though half unconsciously, in the glow of her youth and vitality, in the sheer joy and delight of living.

Suddenly an old koorhaan concealed somewhere among the thorns on the opposite river bank opened his head, and emitted his long, strident crowing. Another answered further off, then another, and presently the whole veldt was alive with the shrill barkings of the clamourous little bustards. Then the first offender rose with an uproarious suddenness that startled Aletta, and put up about ten more, which could be seen winging their way, far and near, adding their alarmed cacklings to his.

Something had scared the bird—something or somebody. Who could it be? Aletta's face flushed. Was it Adrian back again? He had been there that morning and had ridden off, very moody and sullen. Had he thought better of it and returned? Was it Adrian—or—And then the flush which had spread over her cheeks and throat deepened, and her eyes shone with a glad light, for there was a hoof-stroke or two hard by—on this side, not on the opposite bank where she had expected the new-comer, whoever it might be, first to show, and then the identity of the latter was exactly as she could have wished.

"I am in luck's way this morning," said Colvin, dismounting. "Are you indulging in a solitary meditation, Miss De la Rey?"

She answered in the affirmative. The while he had taken in at a glance the whole picture: the tall, graceful figure against the background of trees, the lighting up of the hazel eyes, the flush of colour which rendered the face, framed within an ample white "kapje," wonderfully soft and winning, as its owner stood, with her head thrown ever so slightly back, there before him. Something or other—perhaps it was the "kapje" she was wearing—recalled to his mind a somewhat similar meeting in which May Wenlock constituted the other party to the transaction; but, if so, it was only to think what a long time ago that seemed, and what a change had come into and over his life since.

Then, as her glance fell upon his horse, and some birds dangling from the saddle:

"Why, you have been shooting already. Tell me, do you even go to bed with a cartridge-belt on? How many birds have you got?"

"Brace of partridges and two koorhaan. One is a vaal koorhaan, and a fine one too. It took an astonishingly long shot to bring him down. I could have brought along a blekbok, but thought I'd let him go."

"Why?"

"Oh, I didn't want the bother of loading him up—and the rest of it. He got up right under Punch's feet just after I turned into the gate of the third camp. It was impossible to have

missed him, for Punch is as steady as a rock. So he stood, or rather ran, reprieved. No. I couldn't be bothered with him to-day."

"Why—to-day?"

But with the words she dropped her eyes. Was it before something in his glance? Immediately, however, she raised them again and met his fully, bravely.

"Listen, Aletta. I have something to tell you, and it strikes me first as a splendid augury that I should have found you like this all alone. It is of no use beating about the bush, but—give me your hand, dear, then perhaps I shall be able to tell you better."

Without removing her eyes from his, she put forth her hand. Augury Number 2, he thought, as the long, soft tapering fingers slipped into his. She, for her part, thought how firm, and tender, and speaking was that gaze which she met; and it was of a piece with the manner. No exuberant over-confidence which would have jarred, none of the self-effacing, stuttering diffidence, which would have sapped ever so little, even if but momentarily, the high estimation in which she held this man. Could she herself be as self-possessed?

"I love you, darling," he said. "I have come over this morning on purpose to tell you so. We have not known each other very long, but I have learnt to love you as I never thought it possible to love. Have you not seen it?"

"I don't know," she whispered. But the hand that was within his seemed to close around it with a perceptible pressure.

"Listen now, Aletta"; and there was a softened tenderness about the mere sounding of her name that sent a thrill of delight through her whole being. "I am rather a weather-worn hulk, I fear some people might say, for you in your sweet, bright youth to condemn yourself to go through life with. Yet, if you could bring yourself to face that ordeal, I believe we should make each other very happy. Tell me, now, do you think you can bring yourself to face it—to love an old fogey like me?"

Her eyes answered him. They had never left his, and now the love-light that beamed from them was not to be mistaken.

"Yes, Colvin," she said softly. "I think I can. But—don't call yourself names." And with the words she was gathered to him while they exchanged their first kiss. "Can I love you?" she murmured unsteadily, yielding in his embrace. "Can I love you, did you say? Can I help it? My darling one, you are made to be loved," she uttered, in a very

abandonment of passionate tenderness. “But I—why should you love me—you who have seen so much of the world? I am so inexperienced, so ignorant. I am not even decent-looking. How can I ever make you happy?”

“Ignorant? Inexperienced? My Aletta, you would more than hold your own anywhere—perhaps will some day,” he added, as though to himself. “Not even decent-looking!” he echoed banteringly, and, holding her from him at arm’s length, he affected to scan her up and down. “No. No presence, no grace, supremely awkward—hands like the sails of a fishing-smack.”

“There, that will do,” laughed the girl, giving him a playful tap with one of the libelled hands, a hand which would have served as a model in a sculpture of Iseult of Brittany. “You are only beginning to sum up my imperfections, and I am frightened already. No, really; I feel hardly inclined for a joke even. I am far, far too happy.”

“Kwaa-kwak-kwak! Kwaa-kwak-kwak!”

Both started, then laughed. The old koorhaan, first disturbed across the river bed, was returning, as though some instinct notified him that the fell destroyer was harmless to-day. Right overhead he came, an easy twenty-five yards’ shot. Instinctively Colvin reached for the gun, which he had rested against an adjoining bush; but as quickly he recovered himself.

“We’ll grant the old squawker an amnesty to-day,” he said with a laugh. “I don’t think I could have missed that shot either.”

“Kwaa-kwak-kwak! Kwaa-kwak-kwak!” yelled the bird, as, hovering for a moment, it dropped down among the thorns on the very spot whence it had been first roused. Then they talked on, those two, happy in the happiness which cannot often come in a lifetime—happy in the golden sunshine and the glowing summer of their lives—happy amid the rejoicing surroundings of Nature, in their vastness and peace and calm. Yet, away there to the North—what? The gathering cloud, black as night, sweeping down, steadily, surely—whirled along on the spreading demon-wings of war—the cloud which, bursting into lurid thunders, should overwhelm all with its blasting breath in a vortex of hideous hate and red slaughter, and woe and destitution. No; for the contemplation of this they had no mind.

Suddenly Aletta gave a start, uttering a little cry of consternation.

“There’s the dinner-bell, and you haven’t even off-saddled. How late we shall be!”

“We shall, rather. But what does it matter? Good Lord, though, how the last hour has flown?”

Was it a suspicion born of the fact that these two shared a momentous secret that made them think Stephanus exchanged more than one significant glance with his wife while they sat at dinner? He began to talk about his nephew Adrian. The latter never came near them now. He had changed entirely, and seemed to have run patriotism mad. Moreover, he had taken to associating with certain Boers of a particularly low and disreputable type, such as Hermanus Delport, Gideon Roux, and others.

The while Condaas and Andrina were kicking each other under the table, and Aletta was feeling supremely uncomfortable. Then the worthy Stephanus, suddenly becoming aware that he was romping gaily over mined ground, abruptly changed the subject.

But thereafter was surprise in store for him, when Colvin took him aside and imparted the events of the morning. Stephanus was delighted, and an additional fact, not at present to be divulged, which the other imparted to him, did not lessen his satisfaction.

“Maagtig! Colvin. You are a slim kerel,” he cried, shaking his son-in-law-elect warmly by the hand. “Why, you have kept it dark between you. Well, I don’t know anybody I would rather give my little girl to. Besides, she is almost English in her ways. But, say; it seems a strange thing that you, with ample means to live where you like, should prefer to bury yourself in an out-of-the-way place like this. Of course, for us who are born to it, why it’s different. We couldn’t get on anywhere else.”

“Oh, I like the life, Stephanus. Since I have known Aletta, I have liked it more. By the way, I am under no sort of a cloud at home, if that is what you are thinking about. I could go and set up in London to-morrow if I wanted.”

“I was not thinking otherwise, ou’ maat,” said Stephanus heartily. “Let us go in and tell the wife.”

Mrs De la Rey gave both of them a good-humoured scolding. She ought to have been told first, not Stephanus. Girls belonged first of all to their mother. She, too, was delighted. But the cream of the joke came when they broke the news to old Tant’ Plessis.

“Colvin going to marry Aletta?” cried the latter sharply. “What nonsense are you telling me, Gertruida? Why, Colvin is going to marry Wenlock’s sister. She is the only English girl here, and he is the only Englishman, so of course he is going to marry her. I have heard Mynheer—no, I mean everybody—say so.”

“But it isn’t true, Tanta, I tell you,” explained Mrs De la Rey. “It is Aletta—our Aletta.”

“Aletta?” ejaculated the old woman, upon whom it began to dawn. “Aletta! Oh, mijn Vaterland! Why, he is nearly old enough to be her father!”

“That’s a nasty one!” whispered Colvin to Stephanus, who was nearly losing his life in his superhuman efforts to repress a great roar. It was too much for Andrina and Condaas, who at the other end of the room were pretending to work. They precipitately fled, and, in a moment, splutters and squeals, muffled by a closed door, became faintly audible to those who remained. Aletta had made herself scarce long before.

“Nearly old enough to be her father, and an Englishman!” repeated Tant’ Plessis, wagging her head. “An Englishman! Oh, goeije! Was not one of her father’s people good enough for her? There, Gertruida. See what comes of sending her among the English to learn their ways. She comes home, and wants to marry an Englishman.”

The air, half of horror, half of resignation, wherewith the old woman uttered these words was irresistibly comic.

“Well, Tanta, he isn’t a bad sort of an Englishman, as Englishmen go,” cut in Stephanus, winking the while at his wife. “Besides, remember whom he is descended from, and shake hands and congratulate him,” shoving Colvin forward as he spoke.

“Ja, that is true,” replied Tant’ Plessis, somewhat mollified. “After all, his grandfather was the great and good Calvinus. Well, nephew, follow in his footsteps, and you will be happy. But—Aletta! Oh, mijn lieve Heer! who would have thought it—Aletta!”