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Publisher's Note

As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout.

In Chapter I, we have corrected an apparently incorrect Latin quotation. The printed edition gives "Fata volentum ducunt." We have emended this to "Fata volentem ducunt."

The Marbled Catskin

by
CHARLES HARRISON GIBBONS

*Author of
"A Sourdough Samaritan," "Sixty Black Sheep,"
"The Well in the Desert," etc., etc.*

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To
W. ST. GEORGE ASHE
FORMER DEPUTY COMMANDANT, S.A.C.
ADVENTURING SOLDIER OF FORTUNE AND
GALLANT GENTLEMAN!

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PROLOGUE

THE PROFESSOR HAS THE FLOOR

"It was that misbegotten black cat streaking across in front of me—just missed him by inches. Otherwise"—Bradley grinned rather sheepishly—"otherwise I'd have trimmed the Professor here five-up or better," he concluded lamely.... "I'd like to skin that cat."

The half-dozen of them, settled cosily in the club lounge, highballs within easy reach, laughed in chorus, the Professor alone excepted.

"One alibi's as good as another," chortled Travers. "A new one's an inspiration. The cat's new to me."

"Now what was that? It was the Cat," Brown hummed the ancient ditty from an almost forgotten comic opera, until a well-aimed cushion silenced him. The inseparables applauded.

"I wouldn't take the match if I didn't know he was spoofing," declared the Professor, oblivious of interruption. He was "the Professor" always, outside his beloved Museum, where he was officially "the Curator."

"I don't like cats," he added reflectively to the room at large. "I hate 'em—always have.... Funny things, cats. One either takes to them violently, all sorts, and wants to be forever petting and fondling 'em, or else the whole breed's poison to one.... Cats!" He shrugged eloquent distaste.

The rest of the bunch laughed anew.

"What's poor puss ever done to you?" came from the depths of a big chair from behind which Macrae's bald head rose like the harvest moon with a bushfire smoke halo. "I thought the cat was a sort of sacred beastie? Egyptian or Abyssinian, what?"

The Professor said nothing, pulling at his blackened briar and staring at the glowing log in the wide fireplace. His abstractions were notorious. Brown gave him a poke.

"Wake up, old top! You're forgetting the victor's mead," as he passed a brimming glass. "What you mooning over now?"

"Cats, blast 'em!" The Professor came to life. "As a scientific man I should know better, but sometimes I believe they're all the bad luck folks say." He studied the fire, again silently retrospective. They watched him till the effervescent Brown could keep still no longer.

"Come on, Professor! Something's on your conscience—confess!"

The Professor hitched round his chair to peer at them through his thick-lensed glasses.

"I was thinking," said he, "of a devilish odd tale I heard a while ago. There was a cat in it—the skin of a cat at least..."

He halted, but they were drawing in their chairs encouragingly. The Professor had some rare stories when he was moved to talk. They were in the mood.

"Now then, come through!" Bradley spoke for all. "We demand that story. If anybody else has been getting jinxed by a cat I don't mind taking him on. We'd be even on handicap."

The Professor ignored him.

"H'm! That *was* a creepy thing," he mused. "Poor chap! ... Fourteenth of September it was. I'm not likely to forget that date. It was the night after Darby came in with that fine collection of lepidoptera, diptera, and geometers. Had a butterfly he insisted was *Argynnis*. I pointed out to him it couldn't very well be. The habitat of *Argynnis*, as everyone knows, is Asian and infrequently South African—never these parts. Darby was obstinate. You know how pig-headed some of these chaps get, particularly when they run across a specimen that's likely to get them the spotlight. I was patient with him, and polite. Referred him to Holland and to Howard, and to Comstock, of course. Got the books in and let him see for himself he must be wrong. And yet, would you believe it, he insisted. Even suggested that Comstock—Comstock, mind you—was sometimes a bit of an ass! That *was* going too far, as I told him. 'Comstock,' I said, 'cannot be wrong. *Ergo*: when you say this is *Argynnis*, why, of course—don't you see——' Eh? What's that, Bradley? Oh yes, to be sure—that story.

"It was after my little run-in with old Darby. He actually went off in a huff, calling Comstock a faker! I'd sent the books back and was lighting my pipe. Thought I might take another look at his *Silverspot*—not that he could by any chance be right—when the door opened without so much as a by-your-leave, and this chap blew in. Tallish he was, and grey and haggard and shaky-like. Must have been a husky in his day. Distinctly rugged type, emphatically Nordic. Not that I'd take him for old—more like burned out. He limped in and lurched into a chair. Never took off his wreck of a hat. 'Pon my word, I was flabbergasted, and when I caught his eye it was dull as a fish's. Then a spark came into it and lighted up that dead-ash face. There was a touch of the cavalier in the way he swept off his old hat and stood up.

"'I beg your pardon,' said he—and he spoke like a gentleman—I'm a bit knocked up; forgetting all my manners. Excuse my barging in this way.... I'm on my last legs and I thought perhaps ... well, this musty old Museum of yours might like to get a little thing I have here.... No, I—I haven't had a drink to-day!"

"It seemed to jerk itself out of him while he fished about in his pocket and brought out an odd-shaped scrap of pelt. Beautifully dressed it was, and curiously marked, not mottled—marbled. He shoved it across to me, and I could see his nerves were all shot, the way his hand trembled. I reached to pick it up—I'd never seen anything quite of the sort before and anything new like that naturally intrigues one—when he snatched it up and jammed it back in his pocket with a look as though he meant to fight for it. I thought he must be a bit dotty. He guessed the thought, too, for he seemed to crumple up and the fire died out of his eyes.

"'Sorry,' he mumbled. 'Think I'm a trifle touched, eh?' and he chuckled.... Can you call something a chuckle that chills you through with its suggestions of torture—despair? It was uncanny, anyway. To quiet him I sat down again. I'd jumped up, you see, grabbing a heavy ruler. He saw it in my hand and he actually grinned. But there wasn't any fun in his grin, either, no more than a skull's.

"'Told you I was a bit wobbly,' he grunted. 'But I'm not homicidal, really, as a general thing.' There was nothing I could say. I just waited. There was something about him—I don't know just how to put it.... He took that catskin thing from his pocket again and laid it down on the desk. This time he didn't offer to snatch it back. I hesitated about touching it, though, till he laughed that damn laugh again.

"'Take a look at it—certainly,' he sneered. 'I beg to assure you it won't bite and it isn't poison——'"

"He caught himself up sharp.

"But what is it?" I asked.

"Once more he let out that ghastly chuckle. I could see he was about due for a smash. I'd a bottle of rather good stuff tucked away behind my Hornaday (that's right, Brad—laugh), and I grabbed it and poured him a stiff spot. He reached for it, and his hand shook so he'd have spilled it all if I hadn't held him off. And then, what do you think? He stiffened like an old soldier and held it straight out in front of him in a fist that didn't show a tremor.

"*Amor et melle et felle est fecundissimus*,'^[1] said he, very softly, right out of old Plautus! I told you he was a gentleman. Then he downed the spot and I poured him another, and he gulped that too. They seemed to pull him together and—damn it, I felt sorry for him.... Fine sort he must have been, before things began to happen. He sat hunched up, staring at me with those dead eyes of his, weighing what he'd say, I imagine, and every second or so he'd glance at that catskin thing on the desk and then force his eyes away from it. I picked it up and passed it over to him and he pounced it quick as scat.... What was it? Why, *Felis Marmorata*—thought I'd said so? Oh, it's uncommon enough to be interesting, I assure you, the Marbled Cat! Habitat's very restricted: South-eastern Himalayas, Upper Burmah, Siam and Assam. They claim to have got one or two in the Federated Malay States, but it's extremely rare—much more so than the Clouded Leopard. It's a bit larger than the common house cat. 'Habits unknown,' Lydekker says.

[1] "Love is rich both in honey and in gall."

"I'd promised to be home early, but I clean forgot. This fellow somehow fascinated me. I'm a curious, impressionable old stick, as you fellows know. Anyway, I didn't want to let go of him. I lied, of course, when I told him I was booked for a lonely dinner unless he'd join me. He balked at first, but I finally got him to toddle over to the club with me. It was there, after dinner, he opened up. A shivery sort of tale it was! We had the place all to ourselves long before he'd finished.... It came out by jerks and rushes, with long silences in between. I had to keep prodding him.... And it hadn't any beginning, either, the way he told it. I wrote some letters later and managed to fill in the breaks. That made it a lot clearer, but no less horrible. You see, when I did get him started, he just naturally back-trailed through the years that had sapped him, and the genesis of it all was missing. That was before he'd come into it.... I often wonder what became of him—poor, poor devil! ... I'd best put the thing in some sort of order. It will make it simpler; and I've always been strong for chronological sequence."

The Professor paused, his hands exploring his many pockets. All bulged with old letters, clippings, memoranda. He was something of a perambulating filing cabinet, minus the system. Scrutinising the pack retrieved, he searched for the letter he wanted.

"Better shuffle 'em before you deal," Brown suggested.

"Ah, here it is!" The Professor selected a bulky missive, clumsily folded. "From Merriman," he explained—"Merriman of the Rhodesian Anthropological Research Commission. Sound chap, very, but a bit verbose, when he's not pedantic. Always grubbing about back-country, out-of-the-way places. Been doing it years and years.... I couldn't get the yarn this odd bird had spun me out of my head. There were breaks in it, as I've told you—missing links—hiatuses. I kept puzzling over the tale, getting nowhere. Had to have more data. Then I happened to think of Merriman. 'If anyone's got any inside information on things that have happened in that God-forsaken wilderness in the dead and gone years, it'll be that nosy old fossil Merriman,' I said to myself. So I made an excuse for writing—congratulated him on one of his prosy papers I'd been skimming through in the last Report of the B.A.A.S., and then casually asked if he'd ever run across an old codger named Gentil down in that Sankaeli country, and, if he had, what he could tell me about him, and so forth and so on. You see, the story seemed to hinge in a way on a mysterious sort of party of that name. Merriman's so annoyingly thorough, I felt pretty sure if he knew anything I'd have it from A to Z, cross-indexed and authorities noted. He's that sort. And I wasn't wrong, either. You'd think he'd ground out one of his prolix reports. This was different, though, very. We used to call his usuals 'Merriman's Insomnia Specifics.' Here's what he says—no, you read it, Brown. It'll keep you out of mischief."

He paused to smooth out three or four crumpled sheets criss-crossed with crabbed handwriting and passed them

over.

The letter bore a date of months before, from no place to be found in the Postal Guide. "Rhodesia" is a pretty large order, but the conscientious Merriman had added with habitual meticulousness: "Approximately 137 mis. E. of Broken Hill."

"Sounds like a good ways back of Beyond," commented light-hearted Brown. "Then there's a file number (there would be, of course)—K2164. And over here to the west edge of the page he's got '*Re Gentil.*' ... Well, here goes:

"My Dear Friend and Esteemed Colleague,

"It was indeed most kindly and thoughtful of you, in the midst of your own important work, to notice and so appreciatively write of my poor——"

"You can skip all that first part," the Professor interrupted, "down to about the third paragraph. 'Irrelevant and immaterial,' as the Judge would say. Begin where he starts in about Sankaeliland."

Brown dutifully obeyed.

"Sankaeliland," he read—"I may ball up the pronunciation of some of these outlandish names, but you chaps won't know the dif.—Sankaeliland is a particularly mountainous but well watered and fertile area in the Northern Transvaal, of approximately ten thousand square miles. Its domestic affairs are tranquil at present writing, but this fortunate condition has by no means long obtained. The titular headman or king gives his name to the country, old Sankaeli being pretty generally recognized as a powerful chief who has never been rightly conquered. The Boers tried to read the Riot Act to him and he sent them scooting back home as fast as they came after him. Our people since then have had to discipline him rather sharply on one or two occasions when his people have got out of hand, but these punitive expeditions never have been finished jobs.

"Sankaeli and his outfit (they're an upstanding, hard-scraping lot) have the habit when they are really hard pressed, of running to earth like the wise old fox their chief is, holing up in vast secret caves, of which there seem to be no end in their mountains. I've often wanted to investigate them. Who knows but what—but I digress. This they did in 1878, or perhaps it was '79 (I have no reference works at command here), when Sir Garnet Wolsey blew in the mouths of such caves as he could locate. Of course they must have intercommunicating tunnels or passages. In any case, Wolsey failed to deal a decisive blow. The Sankaelis just lay low till his patience gave out. He could blow up their front doors, but they didn't have to come out at the back till they got good and ready, and that wasn't until the column had trekked.[2] The old chief musters, so I have been informed, some twenty or thirty thousand first-chop fighting men.

[2] Marched.

"Some time after the demonstration in force hereinbefore referred to, a white man of middle age (person marginally noted) appeared one evening at Sankaeli's kraal,[3] seeking an interview with the Chief. No one seems to have any information as to where he had journeyed from, or how. He was travel-worn and of the Thinker rather than the Worker type. Had a very indifferent and meagre outfit—just a couple of pack-donkeys and a fleabitten skeleton of a country nag for the woman with him.

[3] Village.

"She was a washed-out, bedraggled sort, possibly a few years his junior (full white), and there was a female child, a baby in arms almost. The man gave his name as Gentil, and in his palaver with old Sankaeli said he wanted to settle down in his (the Chief's) country, live in peace at the foot of the mountains, till the soil, raise a few cattle, etc. He evidently wasn't English, and he just as evidently wasn't Boer. Those were two points in his favour with the old scalliwag of a king. He likely guessed as much, and to follow up the advantage, if it was one, he was shrewd enough to hint that he hadn't any love for either of them and might be a useful friend—teach Sankaeli's people some of the big magic of the whites who had chased them to the sanctuary of the caves with their great guns, and so forth. The king scowled a bit at that. His recollections of his late visitors weren't any too pleasant, as you may imagine. But he saw the point of that argument too. The old boy is nobody's fool.

"Ordinarily I haven't a doubt he would have ordered the white strangers to the torture of the stake. I suppose you, in your civilized environment, have an idea such pleasant little proceedings are quite obsolete? Here, in Africa, we know better. A stake, pointed and hardened by fire, is planted firmly in the ground. On this the victim, trussed as for cock-fighting, is impaled in a sitting posture. Then the native brats play ring-a-rosy around it and him, poor wretch, and occasionally give him a spin by shoving at his feet. Nice, playful folks! You can keep the sport going quite a time, too, provided the stake has not been made too sharp.

"However, the political balance of power was in something of a flux just then—what with British, Boer, and Zulu bickerings and one thing and another—and old Sankaeli evidently concluded it behoved him to play his cards close to the chest till he saw how the game was going. He hadn't the least desire to see any white man plant himself down in his territory. But he didn't quite know what he might be letting himself in for if he got bumptious. Naturally he played 'possum. Might have heard about King Solomon somehow—missionaries are a pesky nuisance, poking about everywhere—and thought he'd go old Wise Head one better? Anyway, this is what came off:

"White man, I have no quarrel with you or your people,' said he. 'I want none. Have I not but lately had a peace indaba[4] with the white inkosikaas[5] whose kraal is beyond the great waters? Therefore ye shall dwell here in my land. I will give you slaves to build your huts, women to till your fields and boys to tend your cattle. For great is my love for your people and your Chieftainess beyond the black sea.' This was a pretty shrewd stroke, as he thought, no doubt, in case the stranger should be an Englander after all. 'You shall dwell in my shadow and have peace. And I ask of you but one thing—make only one condition——'

[4] Council or durbar.

[5] Chieftainess or queen. A native king would have many wives but only one inkosikaas or consort.

"And that is?" the white man asked.

"It is that when this small child be grown—the Chief pointed a gnarled black finger at the golden-haired girl baby, chuckling happily at her play by the mother's feet—'she shall come to me then, for the house of my women!'

"For just one little instant it looked as though the brooding mountains might have another ghastly deed to whisper over in the night silences. The white man drew himself up, his eyes blazing. Sankaeli clapped his hands and his guards came on the run. Then all the spirit seemed to seep out of the stranger. The fire died as suddenly as it had flared up.... He was a weak man.

"No doubt he had his own pretty urgent reasons for wanting to hide himself out, away from the world of his kind. One may safely assume that much. Also, he probably reflected, it would be long years before the child grew to

womanhood. Much might happen meanwhile. The Chief was no longer young. So he smirked and pondered. Although he spoke the native lingo—fluently, too—it was plain the woman knew no word of it. While they made palaver she was listlessly patching some small childish garment.

"So it came about, much to the foxy Chief's amazement (consternation, perhaps, would be the better word), this Gentil gave his promise.

"It shall be even as you say, great King,' he agreed. 'The girl, as thou seest, is but a tiny bud. When she flowers in womanhood she shall go to the house of the King's women.'

"And that was how Gentil came to have his farm in Sankaeliland and lived for years under the protection of old Sankaeli. I haven't the remotest idea what eventually became of him. Have heard he is no longer there and that his woman didn't last long, after which the man went native; but I've not been up in that country myself for a long time now, and therefore have no personal information on the subject. If there is anything more I can do for you in the premises, be sure and command me."

"And that's that," remarked the Professor as Brown handed back the letter. "One thing I'll have to mention at the outset: this odd egg I'm telling you about, while we were fussing over whether he would or would not dine with me, came out flat-footed with a reason that would only have suggested itself to a gentleman for passing up a square meal he certainly needed.

"You don't know me,' he said, 'and you don't know a thing about me. You'll cancel that invitation, and quite properly, when I tell you I'm a jailbird. Only got out of clink six months or so ago.'

"I can't say I was much surprised. And, not being shocked, as I suppose I should have been, I couldn't look the part. He was watching me pretty closely. I told him I was sure it hadn't been anything serious or some such platitude. And he shot right back:

"Oh no, merely manslaughter!"

"I'm not squeamish. There's a lot of this 'sanctity of human life' stuff strikes me as considerable tosh. Lots of things men—women too for that matter—do worse than getting rid of human vermin.

"As long as men are red-blooded and women are women, things are bound to happen sometimes,' I assured him, chancing a long shot.

"Nothing of that sort,' he answered, quite matter-of-factly. 'I shot an unarmed prisoner—drilled him through the heart, when he was all in and due to drop with hunger and fatigue—Chinaman I'd never laid eyes on before.'

"He wasn't one that would alibi, you see. But that did make it a bit different, man-killing being man-killing. Still, I couldn't pump up the proper horror. Felt pretty sure there was something back of it all that somehow would explain things. So I merely remarked, casually as I could, that we'd a Chinese cook and a laundryman I'd often felt like manslaughtering. And I asked him again as to dinner. He accepted then. Seemed perked up a little.

"I don't know when I've more enjoyed table talk. He was cultured, a gentleman. And he'd travelled a lot, with his eyes open. We kept the conversation general; personal questions never once intruded. He knew his natural history and quite a bit of anthropology, first hand and intimately. Good listener he was, too. It wasn't till we'd gone into the smoke-room that I got on the trail of his story. I'd rung for cigars. Naturally the Chinaboy answered. And, of course, our minds leaped together to the same thing. Couldn't help it. I looked away at once, but not quite quickly enough.

"Quite all right,' said he, guessing pretty close. 'There's Chinese and Chinese, no doubt—Chinamen and Chinese devils. No nation's a monopoly on either vice or virtue. Out in South Africa we got the very worst of the Chinese breed. Sheer fiends they were—the vilest, most heartless, brutish scum of the earth.... No, I'm making no special plea. He got off easy.... Know anything about the coolies they brought in to work our South African mines?'

"I nodded negatively.

"Not many do, outside Africa,' he went on. 'And we know too much. Nobody could tell 'em over in England. They wouldn't listen, and they wouldn't understand if they did. Too many inhibitions of starched civilization. Now you—you've seen a bit of the underneath of things—you might.... You see, these beasts they shipped in for mine labour weren't run-o'-the-mill workpeople at all. Mostly Boxer convicts they were, dregs of the Chinese prisons. Heads of a lot of them still hitched to their bodies not because they deserved to live but because some crooked mandarin didn't give a damn about society's rights if he could market the sweepings of his jails and pocket a bit of cash.... God! Some of them that they sent in to Jo'burg!

"No doubt most of 'em had been in more than one cold-blooded killing. When they'd get in trouble at the mines we'd generally find out they'd been up to murders galore back in China. They were kept in the compounds, or supposed to be. Wasn't much of a trick for them to get out. And unless we'd the luck to nip 'em outside, we'd precious little chance to find out what Chinks were absent from the mine any particular day. All looked alike to the mine bosses. You know how Chinese are?

"And couldn't those devils cover ground when they got out! One of our chaps brought in a gang of thirty. Rounded 'em up forty miles from the nearest mine. How did he bring them in? Oh, tied 'em to a trek chain and rode herd on them with his rifle ready. We've caught them hundreds of miles from the mines, one away up in Pietersburg district and another in Sekukuniland. Never could quite make out how those two got so far without some of the natives spotting 'em. Hated 'em worse than sin, did the natives—and scared stiff of 'em, naturally. Let a native runner run across a coolie and he'd streak it for dear life to the nearest police post. Or, if he hadn't been seen and could keep cover, he'd pot him and plant him, all neatly and quietly—much the better plan, though we couldn't say so.

"All about the Rand, for great distances, too, there were farmsteads set in young fir plantations. Raiding parties of these Chinese cut-throats had these pretty well placed. They travelled in gangs of ten or a dozen usually, hiding up by day in these young firs. When they'd start out on their hellery as a rule they'd travel a couple of nights, make, say, forty or fifty miles. Then they'd swoop down on some lonely farm, bash in the doors and windows with their jumpers—— A jumper? Why, it's just a short length of steel rod. They'd smash in and terrorize everybody till they found out where the money was. Young or old, man or woman, it was all the same.

"Women probably fared worst when they popped on a place. They could make 'em talk quicker when they got their inquisition machinery going. One woman, I remember, stood pat. She wouldn't tell where their little nest-egg was. They hacked off her breasts. If rings were too tight to be slipped off fingers, why, the fingers had to go. Dozens of farmers' wives and daughters out Jameson way are going through life short on fingers.... And of course some folks died. They got short shrift if they showed resistance.

"There was one time, though, they slipped up—farmer named Beer. Young firs all round his place, of course—just the cover the coolies wanted. Beer must have had some notion he was due for a visit—out-of-the-way place he had. Night after night he sat out on his stoep^[6] with a gun on his lap—listening—watching—waiting. Nobody bothered him. He commenced to crack. Thought he'd take a chance on a night's sleep. So he went to bed. But he took the old shot-gun along—kept it right by his side, loaded to the muzzle with looper, and cocked, though his wife gave him what-for for that. Women are a bit dotty at times. She should have had more sense. Beer told me afterwards if the gun hadn't been ready cocked it would have been lilies for him and her.

[6] Porch or Verandah.

"Along about two in the morning his dog yelped just once. Half a second later the window and the door crashed in. He must have grabbed his gun and blazed away before he was really awake. Good thing, too. He let fly again as a bluish shape rushed him, and that coolie dropped with a hole in him you could run your arm through. Looper's about four times the size of buckshot and he wasn't six feet away. For an hour or so he kept firing from his door at every shadow that moved, till a sharp-eared policeman rode up. He'd heard the firing miles away.... No, they didn't quite catch Beer

napping, but it was touch and go. Most of them didn't have his luck.

"When our fellows did get word of a raid—oh yes, I was in the Police then—it was generally too late. Our Kaffir runners weren't to blame, either. They did their best, but the Chinese didn't sit down and wait for us. They'd cover a lot of ground, fast, too, in their forced marches. By the time we were on the job they'd be back at the mines, mixed up with all the rest. What could we do? It was a time of black terror for those poor farm folk. The men used to spend their evenings sitting on their stoeps, rifles across their knees. Lots of our chaps have been greeted with bullets when they rode in to see if everything was O.K. An overstrained man doesn't stop to think that Chinese don't come horseback.

"Our fellows were pretty well worn out, too, with two men out of three on patrol each night, ranging, circling, listening over their huge patrol areas. Some police beats those! The man left behind at Post couldn't sleep much, either. Chinese took to attacking the Posts. A stick of dynamite, fused and thrown on the roof, was apt to startle him a bit if he slept. Somehow they seemed to get all the dynamite they wanted. We caught one with a rifle and cartridges he'd loaded with dynamite. Pity he didn't get a chance to fire one of them!

"It was a great day for that whole countryside when those "poor innocents" were shipped back to China. We all breathed one big sigh of relief. It was no fun searching round the plantations, as per orders. It's mighty easy to knock a man out of the saddle by heaving suddenly at his foot; and it's darned hard to shoot a man coming up on you from right rear. The Chinks were afraid of our chaps—good thing, too. We'd put the fear of God into 'em. But they didn't care a jot for the town police; their hands were tied, and the blighters knew it. Chinese, the kind we had, understand force, and force alone. Justice was something new to them. They were contemptuous of it. Of course we had the lowest of the low. Most of 'em had scabies; a lot were leprous. You have to knock that sort down first and then lead 'em up to grace. And yet they were sent home, thanks be, because the people with axes to grind stirred up the sentimentalists! A sentimentalist is occasionally useful, if he is incapable of using judgment. Only cure for what ails him is to put him down some place alone with the objects of his maudlin sympathy all about him. He'll learn sanity then, if he lasts long enough—especially if his rifle's the only thing between him and his, and atrocities that'd turn your blood cold.

"I'll never forget the look of bewilderment on Keir Hardie's face when they howled him down at Durban. He'd been drivelling about the Brotherhood of Man—the equality of the native. *But the women knew.* They'd been born on lonely farms.... We had to throw all the strength of the old Natal Mounted into Durban or the women would have torn him to pieces.'

"You judged a race by its worst specimens. Is that quite safe—or fair?' I asked.

"He closed up like a clam at that. Just sat there with his mouth tight, staring 'eyes front' at nothing. I didn't fancy the look on his face. It was as if he'd been through hell and the horrors were riding him still. Mem'ry can be damnably cruel. This won't do, I thought. He's got to be jarred out of it.

"Do you think that's fair?' I asked him again—'condemning a whole people, a race, offhand, because you've only happened to brush up against its blackest sheep?'

"He gave me that horrible grin again—Doré's caught it on some of his 'Inferno' faces. 'Lighted by the consuming fires of never-dying hate,' you know. He got up and limped about, getting a fresh grip on himself. Then he stopped square in front of me. his eyes boring into mine.

"Those natives thought those Chinese were devils,' he spat out. 'I *know* it.'

"He sat down again at that and for a long time said nothing more. Seemed to be fighting it out with himself whether to talk or not. A man has to spill his troubles sometimes, they say. Anyway, he decided to talk. His voice was curiously tense, but quiet, when he spoke again.

"It's a rather long story,' he said questioningly, 'if you care to hear it?'

"I nodded for him to go on.

"I'll cut it as short as I can,' he said. 'But—somehow I'd rather like you to understand.... Not that anything matters

now. I'm about through.... I'm unfair to those Chinese monsters, am I? Listen and then decide.'

"His hand went to his pocket. He brought out that catskin thing again and put it in my hand.

"It belonged to Her,' he said.

"His voice wasn't very steady."

The Marbled Catskin

CHAPTER I

FATE TAKES THE LEAD REIN

I look a lot older than I am—the derelict began. I'd just turned twenty-two when I headed out to South Africa. Fit as a fiddle and sound as a nut, three hundred quid in my pocket, digestion of an ostrich, not a care in the world, and a dashed good opinion of myself. I never gave a thought to what I was going to do when I got there. "Sufficient unto the day," and so forth. I'd been in the Cavalry and I'd ridden to hounds quite a bit at home. Knew horses from forelock to navicular bone, and loved 'em. Pretty handy with a rifle, too, and not so bad with a revolver. Frightfully keen on shooting. Africa ought to suit me to a T, I thought, and I'd make her sit up and take notice of me. "It's a big country," I said to myself, "and packed with chances for a bright, husky young fellow." I was on my way, and the world—the African part of it—was my oyster.... That was only four years ago. Look at me now! ... Africa's a mysterious old body. You never can guess her.

All set to be another Cecil Rhodes, of course the first thing I did when I got out there was to see a bit of the country—and of Life. Got in with a rather wild bunch—hard-riding, straight-shooting, everlastingly thirsty, game to the core, most of 'em, full of billy-be-damned. We hit a pretty warm clip. I was having a whale of a time, I imagined. Six months, though, and I was fed up, and there wasn't much left in the pocket-book but room. Where all the coin had gone I'd brought out with me I couldn't figure out. Not that I tried over-hard. Those were sunny, happy-go-lucky days. I was full of ginger; didn't know the meaning of worry. Still, I knew it was about time for me to sit down and have a straight talk with myself. Yes, and get me a job, or old Rhodes's ghost would be getting too much start on me. I did look about, too, but there didn't seem to be anything much doing in a business way where I'd fit in. I could ride, shoot, wrestle, box, swim, run, and carry my liquor like an officer and a gentleman, but no one seemed on the look-out for a young man with just those sterling qualifications for nation-building.

Really I was beginning to feel a shade dubious and uneasy (if you can at twenty-two and chock-a-block with sheer joy of life), when they started to reorganize the South African Constabulary. Baden-Powell's idea, it was. He got 'em together. Took a leaf from the Canadians' book and modelled on their R.N.W.M.P. Officered and staffed we were with veterans from that outfit mostly. Our men were a mixed lot, but right stuff: Canadian ex-policemen, chaps out of the Cavalry, cowpunchers, Australian horse-breakers, New Zealand sheep-herders, Arizonians, Texans, men of the Argentine, the Highlands, Cork, the Yorkshire dales—rectors' sons, remittance men, black sheep of good old families likely as not travelling under new names. Oh, they were a mixed lot—and hard-boiled. But they'd guts and the nerve and beef for the job, and it was no soft snap. Pride was ours, too—Pride of the Force and ourselves. It's a decent foundation to build on.

I was as green as grass when I signed on. Didn't even know the trick of opening handcuffs; couldn't do it at first. Got chaffed a lot over that, naturally, but I'd never seen the things before.... Brought in my man, though.

Some of my first duty details were rounding up these loathly Chinese swine when they'd break away from the mines. Saw lots more of them than I craved to. Very first job I had on my own was on an S.P.C.A. complaint: Chinks at the mines used to stick a pig in a sack with just its head out, while they stuffed it with food to fatten it.... And Sundays they'd muster full force at the compound wire fence and disgust any woman (or man, for that matter) who went by, with their unspeakable indecencies.

They kept me pretty well on the jump till one day they told me (great joy!) I was slated for transfer to Sankaeliland—outpost duty. It was about the time of Bambata's Zulu rebellion and there was something doing every hour of the day, and night. That suited me—action and lots of it! Something new for ever turning up, with just enough danger in it to keep a man on his toes, eyes open, ears cocked, if he wanted to hold his mess number. And that gave a tang to life.... Ridin'—lots of ridin'. Horses—undersized beggars, but keen as mustard, with the sense and the tricks of polo ponies. Enough

sport right along to keep your shootin'-eye top-hole.... It was a good life. I was happy those days—didn't ask a thing better.

There was a lot of unrest in the air about that time—everyone fidgety, with nothing special to tie to. All hands were jumpy—natives travelling about more than usual, nights mostly, uncommon quiet and secretive. That didn't look good. They were getting hold of a few old guns, too—Tower muskets and Boer roers. Where they were coming in from beat us. We wanted badly to find out.

Our job was to be on the look-out for signs of a rising and pick up Zulu envoys that kept coming and going—ringed-men they mostly were, so it wasn't much of a trick to spot 'em. A ringed-man? Why, down in Zululand he's a chap that, in his chief's opinion, or his king's, has reached full manhood—up to warrior measurements. He can wear a ring on his head then, gum and hair mixed and worked round the crown of his head. Inch or so thick it is. Sort of decoration down in Chaka's country, they used to say. Marked "the warrior bold." They're real fighters in those parts. Old Chaka made a nation out of his Zulus. No army of his could go home with its tail between its legs. He'd turn out his boys and kill them. It was his law, of course, that no returning warrior could appear before him bearing arms. They never thought of breaking a law of his, so the boys waded in and slaughtered 'em. Not often, though. They all soon got to live up to the Zulu saying: "If we go forward we die; if we go back we die? Forward, then!"

These chaps we were bringing in, they were mostly ringed-men—big, dignified blighters; no end good scrappers. My word, yes! Any holding charge would do to arrest 'em on those days, so long as we brought them in. Used to nip 'em sometimes for peddling without a licence! That was a pet joke.

There was one thing special had us guessing—worrying, too: all over the district the natives began slaughtering their white pigs and white chickens. There wasn't any law to stop them. It was their own stock. And there wasn't a thing we could do or say. But they only butchered the *white* ones! That gave us some bad half-hours. A bit creepy and suggestive, what? We thought so, anyway. We were white.

Our Post was the usual tin-roofed, one-room shack they all are: three beds, for the corporal and us two troopers, rifle and saddle-racks. We had a native hut alongside that we messed in, and another, a bit smaller, for an office. Stables close, of course, and two or three more huts for our native police-boys. But the country that old Post was planted in! It was a bit of the real Eden, a picture you never got your fill of, with the grand old range back of it for a frame. I can see it now, like I used to, standing at the door, supper over, smoking! The sun dropping out of sight like a great gold ball—the high hills mantled in afterglow, rose-tinted, reflecting the sun's rays till the last of them left the tips of the hills, the peaks melting into the black velvet of the night before the wonderful southern moon came up—the moon and the cross that isn't a cross at all! ... Perfumes of the witching hours—aromatic wood-smoke—acrid smell of the cooking-fires, with our boys squatting around them, telling stories!

It was such a night. I was idling at the door. Morton, the other trooper, hadn't come in yet from patrol. The corporal hailed me from the office. He'd been fussing over some beastly reports.

"Got a job for you in the morning, Ralph," he said. "Better make an early start.... Ever hear of a queer old fish named Gentil, white man they tell me, lives t'other side the range? No one seems to know much about him. Got a farm tucked away in some hidden kloof^[1] over there. Seems to stand in somehow with old Sankaeli. Hear he's got a flock of native wives. Been there a long time according to the say-so. And that's about all I can tell you. We haven't much of a line on him. He's suspected of peddling liquor. Just possible he's running guns, too! Up to you to know when you get back. Better turn in early. Got some riding ahead of you."

[1] Canyon.

It promised to be a bit better than some details. I liked being out on my own with my mare for company.... But at that it wasn't worth thinking twice over. I finished my pipe and turned in. Slept like a log, too. Didn't guess Fate had her hand on my lead rein. What's that Horace says: "*Fata volentem ducunt.*"^[2]

[2] Fate leads the willing.

* * * * *

There are some mornings, thanks to memory, that are everlasting. When I think of that one I seem to breathe again the clear, exquisitely scented air, that heady, delicious elixir that flows from the jewelled high breasts of Africa—see the giant peaks etched against dawn's glory of rose and opal, with great washes of blue shadow—feel the flooding life between my knees as Jean, my mare, danced and sidled up the high veldt trail, her polished hoofs flashing through the dew-heavy dust. Black she was, of that rare blackness like patent leather that glitters in the sun—one short white sock and a perfect little star! ... She was a fine mare.

She had her imperfections, granted. Always she would pirouette kittenishly the first ten or twelve miles. After that she was simply a dream, with her long, easy thoroughbred's walk, hind foot stepping it a good foot over the mark of the fore—her whalebone canter and that gallop of hers that made the world stream past in an unbroken line, the lean head outstretched, the small curved ears showing the Basuto blood, the right one for ever moving forward and back to listen for a whisper! Rocks, holes, bush, everything taken without seeming effort in that magnificent stride! Never once did she fail me.... Ah, well! She's dead now!

I managed the early start. Jean's spirits leaped with mine as we danced blithely up the trail. The world was very good to both of us. Sackabolo birds flaunted their flags as they fluttered by. Small feathered folk chirped and twittered in the high grasses. Once a grey shadow under trees took shape as a huge Koodoo bull that laid back his spiral horns along his sides and with effortless bounds faded silently through the low thorn into nothingness, his thin light striping plain enough in movement. A high-perched sentinel baboon barked menace to me and warning to all his people in the caves and rocks, the echoes booming by kloof and kranz[3] till the topmost peaks chattered back: "Waugh! An armed man moves on the valley trail!"

[3] Cliff.

Then, sudden as thought, a giant shaft of light and vivifying warmth struck down from above the shadow of a nearer mountain. Off came the tunic, to be strapped to the pommel; up went sleeves. The sun was risen. A new day had begun.

It was a long ride round to Sankaeli's kraal. Not that it was any great distance as the crow would fly, but the range stretched between like a great rampart, the pass a good thirty miles, and almost as far to back-track on the other side—sixty miles pounding leather on a broiling day! The heat waves beat down when the sun began climbing, as though someone had opened an oven door.... I was always keen for new trails. I studied that far-flung backbone of the range—Sankaeli's Wall, our boys called it. At one point it seemed to break, as if shattered by some convulsion of Nature in a long past time, leaving a deep kloof, densely bushed. I pulled Jean down to a walk and kept sizing up that shadowy line I fancied might be a great gash in the bushed slope. And the more I mulled over the chance, the more possible it seemed. It was getting uncomfortably hot. Jean's ears were twitching and her neck glistening wet. She swung her head in to the cliff side, her sensitive nostrils quivering.

"Water somewhere about," I thought. I knew my mare. She was right at that. We hadn't made fifty yards more when we came to an immense boulder, a tiny spruit[4] tinkling at its foot. It seemed to come around and from behind the big rock. I dismounted to have a look, Jean crowding at my heels. At the base of the boulder was a trail so faint and almost obliterated it must have been long abandoned. It made almost an acute angle about the base of the rock and (which was queer for that sort of country) it widened as it twisted crazily upward, and was fairly clear going. We were out of the broiling sun and the coolness was a bit of all right. I hated to go back to that blazing hot trail, though I knew I ought to. "Might as well see where this thing goes," I thought, as a sop to conscience. And then I did get a surprise.

[4] Streamlet.

The faintly defined path took another of those sudden twists and led into a narrow cleft that ran right into the mountain-side. Twilight lingered there, and a wonderful silence. There was no twitter of birds. Even the shrilling of the cicadas had been blotted out. There wasn't a sound but the elfin whispering of the little stream... There's a lily grows in the high kloofs of Sankaeliland—a lovely yellow arum—and it was there in the shade of every rock. Where the stream trickled and tinkled it grew in prodigal profusion, sort of "Field of the Cloth of Gold." Stillness seemed to have reigned there since the birth of time.

That kloof or canyon went on for a good half-mile, widening out in places till it would be all of a hundred feet between the straight-up-and-down rock walls—pinching in other places so that the mare's sides brushed the rocks as we squeezed through. It brought us to a tumbled gulch, through which the dim, disused trail crooked and turned, mounting steadily, at no place over steep. It wasn't a game runway. There was no spoor[5] of any animal.

[5] Footprint; track.

I mounted again and we kept going. Sometimes we were scrambling over boulders tossed helter-skelter, grotesquely—then ploughing through lush velvety moss—now cantering on bald, bare rock, smooth and level as a pavement—now pastern-deep in a slimy, slippery blue clay that was almost gumbo, the mare finding hard footing in it. And all the while we kept going up! When I stopped to breathe Jean, we must have covered a mile and a half or more from the beaten trail and gained easily fifteen hundred feet altitude. It was going right the way I wanted, too! I was mightily pleased. If I'd dropped on a short cut to Sankaeli's district it'd be a lucky find, particularly if we kept our teeth shut on knowing about it, which we would.

I might have guessed things were running too smoothly not to have some trick in store. The gorge pinched in so that I had to dismount and lead along the right bank of the spruit, the mare's hoofs sinking soundlessly in the thick carpet of springy turf. We rounded a corner of basalt and came suddenly to the end! The way was blocked completely by a boulder half the size of Gibraltar that in the years gone by must have split off and tumbled from the crags above, and under which the little stream that had been our guide now vanished with a flash and a chuckle. On every side forbidding walls of rock towered precipitously, scarcely a foothold or a handgrip anywhere. For a horse there was but one possible exit—the way by which we had come into that sylvan cul-de-sac. And then I began to realize that my bent for exploring was likely to prove a confounded nuisance. I would have to go back and round by the regular track, having wasted half a day. By rough reckoning I was now fairly sure Sankaeli's kraal, or at least this Gentil's farm, must be just about over the lip of the cliff—a couple of miles at most, and a good fifty it was around! Study those cliffs as I would, they glowered back "Verboten!"

One more case of "so near and yet so far," I reflected. Maybe I added a few ripe cuss words, for Jean looked up from cropping the lush wet grass, reproach in her eye. I was mad enough at things in general to swear at her just for that. A man's mare's got no right to look an "I-told-you-so" at him. Then and there I got my back up ... If only I could find some way to scale those steep cliffs I wouldn't have to go back? Jean was safe enough where she was, with such grazing as she seldom got. I could knee-halter[6] her and reconnoitre. No sooner said than done. I off-saddled, cacheing saddle and rifle. Pig-headed and obstinate, I was willing to take some long chances. "Anyhow," I reflected, "I may as well have a look-see at what's on the other side of this big rock, if I can only get round it some way. Must be pretty well through the mountain by this time."

[6] To couple the head to one foreleg close enough to prevent the animal moving fast.

There were creepers of a sort half-clothing the north face of the blockading boulder. I managed to work myself round twenty feet or so, clutching them with my fingers, till I struck a cleft in the rock side. That made it easier going, and at last I wriggled myself round to the other side, where I could look down. I strangled an exultant shout, for I had not guessed wrong.

There was quite a sizable farm tucked away in a strip of verdant valleyland, no doubt this Gentil's place; twenty or more native huts in a scattered group; orchard trees—peach and apricot mostly; one larger hut almost in the centre of the farmstead, in a square, built white man's fashion; blue gums, likely grown from imported seed, under which sheep and goats were drowsing—a pretty large flock of the goats. The huts were of the common sort, round and thatched with grass. Everything seemed to be well looked after. The farm was not enclosed in the native way, with a hedge of the prickly pear. This further satisfied me some white man was boss of the works; and if any white man had his home in that quarter it could only be this queer fish Gentil. The mountains lifted their huge fronts on all sides from the edge of the pasture fields, where oxen grazed, with a few sleek horses. A laughing stream came tumbling down the hillside and went wandering about the farm. It made a pretty picture.

But how to get down to it was quite another thing. It seemed sheer impossibility. Bald rocks, up-ended like the walls of a room, dropped hundreds of feet below me. Not so much as a clump of wachen-beetje^[7] or a stunted mimosa bush showed anywhere on their faces. No fault in the rock offered foothold or handgrip. It looked very much at that as if I'd have to retreat and take the long, hot roundabout trail. After all, "orders is orders!"

[7] A South African thorn; literally "Wait-a-bit."

And then I happened to notice that, just at the lip of the cliff, a gnarled old banyan reached out its arms into nothingness, its twisted lower branches sound and safe. I squirmed about till I could get hold of and crawl out on the stoutest limb, swinging crazily with the world beneath me. The limb lay almost along the cliff face, and this broke, about a tall man's height, into a little cup-like depression between the great rocks, a mighty pretty nook, flower-carpeted and deep-shaded with perfume-breathing mimosa shaking its golden balls of springtime bloom. The little spruit trickled out again from the rock, to tumble (still chuckling) into a darkly-deep pool over which the mimosas stretched out shielding arms. That waterfall looked for all the world like a bridal veil.

I took a good grip on my swaying perch, dangled my legs in space, swung back and forth a few times, and let myself go! My heels hit the spray-soaked grass, and I sprawled face-down. As I picked myself up, growling, and started to scrape the black mud from my breeches, I was startled almost out of my wits by a quickly smothered ripple of silvery bell-like laughter—the merry mirth-music of care-free girlhood!

I forgot all about Gentil and his farm and his gun-running—the duty that had brought me up here in the heart of the mountains and this fairyland nook—the disfiguring blob of mud that marked the success of my leap but made a wreck of my breeches any inspecting officer would have thrown a fit over. One thought possessed me—to locate the source of that stifled delicious laughter!

I peered into the foliage-screened background—nothing there. There was no fairy perched in the trees. The cliffs were bare; no cover for so much as a dassie^[8] to hide behind. The flower-sprinkled turf was an unbroken carpet of colour. My eyes followed the little spruit that went tumbling down the cliff-face—stared, questing, into the mimosa-roofed deeps of the tarn, over which the rock walls hung a tapestry of glorious lilies.

[8] The South African rock rabbit.

And then I saw Her!

She was in the pool itself, a glowing nymph, graceful as a sculptor's dream of Love incarnate! Two wide-set eyes of sapphire pictured amazement absolute—consuming curiosity—but no fear. No fear and no self-consciousness. Lips red as pomegranates were still half-parted coaxingly; light laughter lingered on them. Her hair of spun gold was lightly wound round and round her haughtily lifted head.... A white girl beyond doubt! A white girl dazzlingly beautiful, and not more than seventeen. A golden girl, for the ardent African sun had touched that radiant flesh only as might a lover. The water where she stood caressed her dimpled knees. One hand rested lightly on a ledge of rock. In the other, all forgotten, was a gorgeous lily.... She wore no more than the unmarried maids of Sankaeliland: a string of blue glass beads thrice wound about her firm young throat—a blue belt or girdle, and, suspended from it, her moocha—a sporran of a marbled catskin!

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She was standing there in the pool! To the cliff face the rock lay level as a floor—a sort of natural platform, that woodland eyrie. It hung in space—and what a prospect: the line of the Steelpoort river, a silver ribbon strung out a hundred miles—old Spitzkop towering skyward, a brooding sentinel for ever on guard over his broad, misty bush veldt. The tinkle of the water made you think of elfin bells, and all the crystal air was heavy with the warm scent of mimosa bloom. Level with the cliff lip a hawk hung motionless, watching with his keen yellow eyes the tree-embowered farm, and the fowl in particular, I suppose. That cliff dropped sheer away like the wall of a skyscraper. The pool was all silver and glancing shadow, blue and gold and opal, reflecting the sun and the sky, with a dream wisp of a rainbow where the breeze caressed the spray from the fall. It all seemed to fit in—to be just the right setting for that golden girl. She was Psyche—She was Echo—She was everything men have dreamed of—glorious, glowing girlhood!

She leaned a little forward, poised daintily, questing, her great violet eyes puckered up in delicious puzzlement at me, standing there like a wooden Indian. Time had stopped for both of us. Then she smiled, and that smile about finished me. Thought surely I must be day-dreaming—of that witch Venus, reborn more tantalizing than ever! I daren't move for fear I'd wake up. But I did manage a shaky salute that ought to have got me a proper call-down.... And I faked a grin....

"Good morning, miss," I said, like a silly ass, as if we'd just met in Bond Street.

She didn't say anything to that—just looked bewildered. There were diamond points in those eyes of hers. Seeing she didn't make the English, I tried Dutch. Drew another blank—but once more she smiled, and I wouldn't have changed places with the O.C. himself. Then I had a shot at it in the native:

"*Sack-a-bawna!*"^[9]

^[9] Good-morning.

That had more sense to her. A dimple played hide-and-seek.

"*Sack-a-bawna, n'Koos!*"^[10] she came back at me, getting her little pink tongue round the clicks of the lingo and no trouble at all. Mighty few whites can do that.

^[10] Good-morning, Chief.

And there we were—stumped! "Good morning" is all right enough for a starter, but it's not satisfying as *tête-à-tête* chat. There were lots of things I wanted to hear her say, but I'd been struck dumb. Always was a bashful sort. Racked my brain for native words, but none I could think of would help. Police talk didn't fill the bill. Somehow, too, I hated to be

jabbering native to her. She was *white*. And she kept looking at me, likely enough trying to puzzle out things from her side, and no less up against it than I was. Every once in a while she'd turn loose the smile, as if the sun wasn't doing its best! ... I can't put the thing in words, but I fancied then something in each of us was reaching out to the other! ... She was all as surprised as I was; I could see that. And too curious to be frightened, I figured it... My Lord! All at once it struck me—she must have been taking a bath and I'd come barging in, yammering and staring at her! What sort of pup must she take me for? The cold chills ran down my neck—and I'd thought it was hot! Even smiled, she had, when she must have been scared half to death... What could I do? If only she'd listen to honest English! Like a gawk I stood there, running over my stock of Kaffir. My vocabulary wasn't any too good, and most of the words I knew wouldn't fit in at all. I could have kicked myself properly. Mean? Meaner than a sheep-killing dog, I felt. Must have reddened up—ears burned, I know. And I daren't look again...

Right then I got a sprinkle of cold water! It startled me so my head jerked up, and if the little minx wasn't splashing water at me, playful as a kitten! She'd edged a bit closer, too—didn't seem to be worrying over the conventions. Probably never heard of them—so pure and innocent, everything was all right to her. But I'd stood grinning at her, though I swear I'd never thought anything nasty, either. But a hyena would have had more manners. What to say I didn't know, and if I had I couldn't have said it. While I scratched my thick head for an idea, she spoke again:

"Hamba gachle, n'Koos!"[11] She was sidling out of the water as she said it, at the far side of the pool. She was going away! How she could go anywhere beat me, but I didn't want her to go.

[11] Good-bye: literally "Hasten slowly."

"Please don't go," I blurted out, like a fool, talking English again, and I started towards her. She understood that all right. Just one graceful, effortless bound and she was on the bank, light-footed as an impala[12] of the plains. Like a swooping bird she'd picked up a little assegai, and with the thing in her hand she flashed exquisite defiance. Looked awfully cunning at that. If I thought at all, I must have had a fool idea she was trying to tease, but I was rattled every way and I took a step forward. The assegai whizzed. I just managed to drop and duck it... When I scrambled to my feet she was gone!

[12] Antelope.

It wasn't a split second! She was there—and she wasn't! Gone as quickly and as noiselessly as the golden reflection of a hand-glass thrown on a dark cliff when the hand that holds the glass moves.

The whole thing was getting queerer and queerer. Could she really have been there at all? Had I got a touch of the sun? If she was real, who could she be? If there was anyone like her in the whole country we must have heard about her. I wasn't quite sure of anything.

Yet everything else seemed real enough: the familiar hills—those up-and-down walls of rock—my friendly banyan tree—the well-ordered farm dozing among the blue gums on the flat below—the hawk still poised on its watch—the cascade's faint tinkle—drone of insect life—swish of water falling somewhere away below—all substantial facts! Those rocks were certainly solid. The spray from the falls was wet. But could there have been a wonderful golden girl? How could there be, here in Sankaeliland, and never a whisper about her? If she were real, where, then, was she? If she

Something hard turned under my boot. I stooped and picked it up.... It was her trim, sharp assegai.

Round and round and round again I searched every foot of that nook with its waterfall and its pool, its lilies and its

encircling walls of rock. Not a trace of her! Nor a clue to how or where she had vanished. "Must be some key to the riddle," I kept telling myself. If there was, I couldn't get hold of it. I began to think of some of the fantastic things I'd heard since I'd come to the country: Old Africa has many an odd trick. She holds her secrets close.

I'd kept poking about mechanically, and at length in a tangle of mimosa at the very lip of the cliff I nosed out the end of a long reim.^[13] It was tied to a great root and trailed off loose in space. All of thirty feet it was, with big knots every foot or so—sort of primitive ladder. Not likely others followed my banyan tree route? I stretched out flat on the rock and peered over. At first there didn't seem a thing breaking the sheer descent—four or five hundred feet of a drop—to where the cliff ended in a steeping slope. I went over it again with my eye, inch by inch this time. The rock wall at one place did seem to overhang slightly? There might be a ledge there, invisible from above? The reim suggested as much. Could She have gone that way? In the one brief instant my eyes had been off her? No chance! But the whole thing was weird. Why puzzle over a part where all is mystery? That dangling rawhide might lead somewhere. It seemed safe enough, securely fastened. I could scramble down and up again. There might be some narrow trail to the valley farm. "Nothing ventured, nothing learned!"

[13] A strip of rawhide much used in Africa in place of rope.

I made sure it was all fast, took a good grip, crooked a leg round the reim and eased myself over the lip. There were twenty-eight knots in that reim. I'd counted. I had passed the twelfth knot when that tiny grot of miracles handed me another jolt: my foot had found firm if precarious footing on the narrow horizontal shelf. A cautious reconnaissance all but convinced me there was a narrow path hugging the cliff so close as to be almost part of it. "So that must be how she did it," I thought. If I'd stopped to use any reason, it was patently absurd. But the day had been packed with fantasies; one more mattered little. I set foot tentatively on the thread of trail—a chamois would be none too sure of it—when I all but let go my hold in the face of a fresh surprise that scrapped, then and there and finally, my new half-conclusions: *She had laughed again! Right above my head!*

It could be no one else. That rippling music and my golden girl were one and indivisible. She must have been hiding somewhere! And I could have sworn I'd searched so closely a pin couldn't have escaped me! Holding tight to the reim, I looked up. Two mischievous eyes twinkled straight into mine. Then they drew back as I scrambled up again—must have done it well under half a minute.... The pool was there—but no girl!

There was no one there—positively! I combed every tiny shrub—looked under every stone almost—investigated every scarp or jut of rock—and about every leaf and lily and blade of grass. But there was no golden girl—no girl at all. There was no mortal way out but by the reim, and she'd not touched that! Perhaps even then she was peeping out at me from some magical hiding-place, laughing to herself in this game of hide-and-seek? She couldn't have melted into thin air! ... I wasn't so sure of that, though. "Africa is the land of the impossible; her mysteries are the wisdom of the ages." I'd read that in a book.

Meanwhile the sun was sinking. Shadows settled, purple-black, on the lower hills. My watch said four o'clock. If I'd found a way to Gentil's stead I would have to step lively to follow it. That spiderweb path was no place for a man at night. With one last useless look about me, I swung myself off again and went down the reim, monkey-fashion.

Once on it, that crazy trail wasn't so bad—for a Swiss guide. Troopers aren't mountaineers, however. It took a bit of doing in spots, where it clung to the cliff by the eyelashes, just about foot-width, with only grassroots to hold on by, and a few hundred feet of a tumble if they gave. I didn't dare look down. There were places, too, where the water oozed through the rocks—plaguey slippy, those bits. Once or twice I thought I was gone, but I managed somehow to catch on to something in time. It was better going after a bit. The trail widened where it crossed a curious sort of hanging gallery with weird paintings on the wall—animals and birds, and what I took to be meant for men. Must have been there hundreds of years. Creepers all but covered some of them.

There were bridges, too, tree-trunks so old and rotten I expected 'em to give every time—sometimes a single log; sometimes two together, the bark chipped for footing. These spanned deep canyons. But never a footprint anywhere. That

trail couldn't have been used for years and years. There were no signs of any other. I wondered a bit, but it was taking me where I wanted to go, and that was the main thing.

Where the cliffs about ended the trail all at once seemed to stop. It really didn't matter much then. The fields were in plain sight and nothing in the way a man couldn't make through. I had caught sight of a little black cobra, one of the spitting sort that they say will blind you. It wriggled behind a rock and I gave it the road. Watched my step closer after that.

As the sun went down I was in the outer field. Looking back, it puzzled me how I'd ever come down. Black against the pulsing crimson glow the serrated edge of the mountains towered. A baboon barked harshly from a high peak. A troop of blue monkeys whipped across in front of me. I had seen no sign of anyone since that glimpse of her laughing face peeping down at me over the cliff. Once on the level earth again, I wondered if she really had. It all seemed chimerical.... I'd not risk talking about it at the Post. No one would believe me.

By the time I was half-way across the farm I'd decided to say nothing there either. If the lady *did* show herself, it would be her lead ... She couldn't be any of this Gentil's people, for the corporal had said he had native wives. The more I muddled over it, the more the mystery grew—and I could think of little else. Wondered, of course, if I'd ever see her again. It wasn't likely. A young lady who went about very much *au naturel* and seemed to climb like a monkey to the mountain top for her bath, armed with a mighty nice assegai and perfectly willing to use it, wasn't apt to be among those present at any social doings in our countryside. I couldn't picture her handing me a cup of coffee and asking if the mail from home was in....

Something halted me right there—a little run of stones clattering down the hillside. I scanned the empty cliffs. Empty? Well—almost empty. My eye caught a note of movement—very slight: a branch of tree-thorn trembled as though some hand had just released it.... For a fleeting instant I glimpsed her, running lithely between two great rocks at the foot of the cliffs. She *had* followed me down!

CHAPTER II

MYSTERIES MULTIPLY

So she did belong thereabouts! We probably should meet again! My pulse quickened and my pace.... Could she be kin of Gentil by any chance? I slackened up. Daughter of a supposed whisky-peddler suspected of gun-running that I'd come to put over the jumps? One consolation, I reflected—it was no more than suspicion yet, either way. Might not be a thing wrong about the man. I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. What was it the corporal had said? "No one knows much about him. We haven't any line on him."

At that, he *might* be something to Her? I had not seen where my sprite disappeared. She had fluttered like a sunbeam for an instant only in the line of vision. Likely in another minute she would be telling someone of her big adventure. Her mother? That would mean some explaining! ... *But she had not been any more dressed when I had caught that last glimpse of her than she was at the pool!*

Complications thickened. I gave it up. No use speculating till the facts cleared themselves. I had my duty to do. Some comfort I was working under orders.... Turning over the puzzles of the day as I came along, I had been making progress. Scent of peach and apricot blossoms told me I was in the orchard. Night had fallen swiftly in that valley shut in by the great hills. Farm buildings shaped themselves, looming solidly black. Dim fires glowed by the native huts. Light showed from the master's house as I neared it.... Yet everything was silent! No kaffirs crowded curiously. Not a dog prowled about to bark suspicion. Mighty strange! ... Well, I should soon know what it all meant. Nerve tension began to tell. And I missed the mare. Not often we worked afoot.

I had no preconceptions of what my man might be like, but everything, so far as I could judge in the dimness,

bespoke him a good farmer. It was a lot cleaner than most outlying places—tidier—better kept up. White stones marked a flower-bordered walk. Scents strange to Africa, yet unforgettably familiar, lingered about the garden—mignonette among them, like a breath from home.... There was no one on the stoep. I knocked.

"Hullo there!" I shouted.

Someone called within. A light moved, a big man bearing it. Tall, broad-shouldered, patriarchially bearded, roughly clad, yet he moved with unconscious grace. There was something about him suggesting the elegance of old nobility. His long, thin hands were powerful and certified to much toil, yet his nails were well cared for. His heavy hide veldtschoon^[1] were clean, neatly laced and tied. A trooper's bound to notice these inconsequential details. We have 'em well rubbed into us.

[1] Farm boots.

As he towered before me, framed in the doorway, shading the lamp with his hand, his face was calmly impassive, and yet not mask-like, for the eyes were warm and kindly. It was not a strong face, and it hinted of much suffering. He greeted me in formal Dutch, slow-spoken, gravely courteous, with no hint of the surprise one would have expected. A gentleman once, unquestionably. They say "once a gentleman, always a gentleman." His eyes perplexed me most. They were not a coward's, nor a criminal's, but they mirrored anxiety that was almost terror, determination offset by resignation. He was strangely complex—compelling compassion as a man of sorrows—damnably weak-chinned.

"I regret to have kept you waiting," he said, feeling for each word, the voice deep and sonorous. "We are sadly upset this night. That is my apology.... Please enter.... Have you dined? ... Your horse? Has it care?"

Not even when I told him I was afoot did his face hint amazement, and that should have been as much of a facer as any I had stumbled upon. Interest seemed dead in him.

Without further words he ushered me into his living-room, waved me to an extra-comfortable chair (one of those half-reclining affairs with long arm extensions, such as they have in India and in Africa), and set out glasses, rare old brandy, and water cold as ice. I poured myself a fairly stiff tot. He took a thimblefull, for mere courtesy's sake, I imagined.

"*Prosit!*" said I, tossing down mine.

"*Salaam!*" he gave me back, his glass barely touching his lips. The man seemed distinctly uneasy—restless—distract. Yet instinctively I felt that my coming had nothing to do with whatever was bothering him.

"A bath is being prepared. It will rest you," he told me in his slow, precise Dutch. "And dinner will be ready when you are.... Now may I ask you to excuse me for a little time—and honour me by considering as yours my poor house and all within it."

With that he bowed ceremoniously and went out, leaving me with a bit more to puzzle on—the farm in this hidden kloof, the secret trail to that fairyland mountain pool, my golden girl of magic, the man himself perhaps most of all. He had said "*Salaam*" when we touched glasses. That meant India!

My host gone, his room challenged attention. Widely different from the living quarters of most farmhouses it was, with an atmosphere of culture and refinement: simply furnished, yet wholly comfortable; and very restful. Nothing anywhere to suggest a woman about, unless it was the organ that filled one end of the room—a massive, complicated American affair with half-pipes, pedal clavier, and a double-banked keyboard. But a satiny meerschaum, black as ebony, lay on the music-rack. That didn't look womanish. Evidently he was fond of music.

I pawed over the heap of sheet music on the stand by the instrument: Adolfati, Ahle, Mozart, Beethoven,

Mendelssohn, Bach, Tchaikowsky, Handel, Obrecht, Liapounov, Lichnowsky, Lomakin, Brahms—a cosmopolitan yet catholic selection, and mostly Russian composers, but no trash. Largely sacred it was, with some great oratorios and a few symphony masterpieces. I hoped he'd play for me.

There were a few pictures, worth-while originals I judged. But mostly the walls were lined with books—old, old books many of them, bound in a dull grey leather, apparently all by hand and all by the same hand. His books, too, were almost exclusively religious—theological works in tiers (Russian, Dutch and German, besides what I took to be Hebrew and Greek), commentaries in second place, with history, philosophy, science, political economy—not a thing in fiction. No sign of a magazine. His mind, it seemed, craved rather substantial fare.

Only one in a score or so of books I dipped into was printed in English; and it, by the way, was about the only one that had not been rebound in that grey leathery stuff. It was Lydekker's British Museum handbook on the fauna of the mid-Asian high lands; and when I reached it down it opened itself at the section devoted to the cat family. There was something pencilled on the margin, but I couldn't make it out. The language was foreign, with some letters different from ours, and the writing was very faint. Of course I could read the paragraph marked. It was about a species called *Felis Marmorata*—the Marbled Cat. Remarkably rare, it was claimed.

I hadn't quite finished it when the servant came to pilot me to the bath. Giant of a kaffir he was, very old and dignified. Showed me the shelf of big rough towels, with soap, brushes, even bath salts! I hadn't seen such a lay-out in months. Then he backed himself out, saying something about dinner. That bath settled one thing for me: a chap that would be so thoughtful for the comfort of a casual guest could not be a border villain true to any type I knew. Whatever mess he had got himself into, I was slightly prejudiced for the defence.

When I had finished my soak and my scrub, dinner was served. There was nothing special about the spread, but every detail was right—fine linen and silver and china, you know. It was a tasty dinner, too—a clear soup, an entrée that wouldn't have disgraced the best chef in Jo'burg, a nice crisp salad, a sweet, and prime coffee—Turkish I'd say. The old gentleman did the honours handsomely, but ate nothing. I supposed he already had dined, and I could see he was fidgety: started at every sound, kept getting up to peer out of the window, and shot a few questions at the table-boy that I couldn't make any sense of. We didn't talk much. My Dutch wasn't any too good and he didn't have as much as I did, and what he had was rusty. Seemed friendly and frank enough. By the way he acted I took it whatever was bothering him hadn't anything to do with me or a guilty conscience.

After they had cleared the table and he had brought out cigars, I concluded it was about time to get down to business. Didn't fancy the job, but all the more reason to get it over with. I was wondering how to start in, putting things up to him as decently as I could, when he gave me the lead. My uniform spoke for itself. He pointed to it and smiled.

"May I ask, without discourtesy clouding hospitality, if it is to any official matter hereabouts that I owe the pleasure of your company?" he asked in his involved, formal way.

That was putting it right up to me, and I saw no sense beating about the bush. So I told him point-blank why I'd been sent to look him over. I watched him close while he got the gist of it, but he didn't seem in the least concerned—more like amused. Told me it was all quite ridiculous and that he was glad I had come. Would I remain as his guest as long as I could and cared to? I could go where I liked, do as I liked, talk to whom I liked, and (he took a big bunch of keys from his pocket and laid them in my hand), search where I liked and whenever I liked. The way he said it convinced me he hadn't much to hide. Chances were he was glad of company. The monotony of his life, it struck me, would be devilish trying. I let the old chap see I believed him, and that apparently pleased him; and I told him I might stay a day or two if he'd put me up.... In the back of my head I'd the idea I might find out something of that girl.

That was a strange sort of evening! I wanted to find out all I could about him. That was duty. But he was a gentleman and my considerate host. There are some things one doesn't do. He wanted all the news for years past, on lines I didn't know much about: Had Russia absorbed Japan yet? Did they make Kuropatkin governor of the Punjab? Had the British cleared out of India? I could answer that one, anyway. He seemed puzzled to hear they had not. Russian himself, he told me—"once in holy orders." That accounted for the library make-up. There was a vague something in his talk, too, of a diplomatic mission he seemed to have made a hash of, but I couldn't make head or tail of half he told me. One thing, however, I did get, for he said it two or three times, more to himself than to me—"The Little Father never forgives!"

He had been there in Sankaeliland, I gathered, very many years, with no outside contacts whatever. It was quiet. He was not unhappy. It had come to be home to him. His farm was good and he wanted for nothing. Never had any labour trouble; the king sent him women to till his fields and to do for him generally. There were boys to hunt and to herd the cattle. Sometimes he made gifts of horses and cattle to Chief Sankaeli. Means were found for him to send out the products of his farm, in exchange for such things as he wanted. He was working on a cure for horse-sickness, and that kept his mind occupied. It was a goodly life—for here was peace.

"The peace part is all nice enough," I agreed, "but you must get mighty lonesome with no folks of your own kind around?"

"My wife journeyed hither with me," he said, very quietly. "She has slept a long time now, on the mountainside where the lilies grow."

"And you never married again?"

He shook his head. "My women here have served faithfully. They suffice."

"She left you no children—your wife? No son? No daughter?"

His face hardened and darkened as I leaned forward eagerly.

"I have no child," he answered. "We once had a pretty babe. Her also I lost—soon after my good vrouw."

Another budding theory gone smash. I checked an inclination to speak then of my sprite of the mountain pool. Looking back, she again seemed more likely to have been fay than mortal—the illusive spirit of Springtime, Youth, Laughter. I said nothing about her. Talk turned to commonplaces. He brought out books, invoices, order sheets, correspondence, accounts, all very orderly and complete. From these I saw his liquor imports were by no means immoderate, not more than sufficient for any reasonable man's own use. He had said he never gave stimulants to his people except medicinally. The ammunition bills were all right, too. He showed me his shot-gun and a heavy revolver. Ammunition figuring in his accounts (and they ran back fifteen years or more) suited their calibres. On the documentary evidence we could give Mr. Gentil a clean discharge, and I told him as much. He showed no sign of any relief. My mission did not appear to have concerned him overmuch.

"I have broken no law," said he. "Why, then, should any officer of government be unwelcome here? ... Perhaps ... perhaps, indeed, you may help us."

I thought then of what he had said when he came to the door: they were sadly upset over something. No one about the place. No dogs either. I had thought best to ask no questions and he had volunteered nothing more. I recalled, too, his abstractions, his obvious anxiety, his questioning of the servant.

"I'll be glad to do anything I can," I told him, "if you'll let me know what's up?"

He had been pacing the floor. He stopped short. His face darkened, passionately vindictive.

"We have lost one of our children here," he said with strange intensity. "A baboon stole her. They can get no trace."

He paused an instant. "Baboons," he went on, cold hate in his voice, "baboons are fiends. I would that I could kill every one of them!"

I sat up a bit at that. I'd never had it in for the baboons especially. Thought they were rummy little chaps, the babies in particular, all pink and hairless and not in the least afraid. Always used to duck the baboon hunts myself, when we went out before the dawn with kaffir spotters to try to catch them asleep in the rocky kloofs and caves. That job seemed a shade too close to murder, even at two-and-six a tail bounty money. Of course, they're rough on the crops at times and do a bit of mischief, travelling as they do sometimes in troops of thousands.... And I heard they would carry off children every chance they got.

"The baboon is a raider, a farm wrecker, a coward, a thief, a murderer"; Gentil bit off each word. "I have seen a couple of big ones literally tear a pointer dog to pieces with their hands and teeth. Many ewes have I lost through them ripping out their udders to drink the milk. They never let a man with a gun get within range of them, but they fear no woman. They will attack women every time.... And the babies——"

Again he stopped abruptly. His manner and expression altered. Once more he was the considerate host.

"But all that will keep until morning," he remarked apologetically. "We are organizing a wider search. You may perchance give us counsel.... First, a good sleep, though. Shall I show you your room? May I offer you a drink before you retire?"

He led the way to a cool sleeping chamber, waving introduction to it from the doorway. As he handed me my lamp and bade me good night he added:

"This was, I think, a pet baboon.... The babe was just six months old."

* * * * *

I should have slept like a log. I was very tired. The bed was the best I'd been in for months. It was pleasantly cool, with no vexing flies or mosquitoes. Yet I tossed and turned and twisted. Reaction, I suppose. It had been an exciting day. Tried shutting my eyes and counting. That nymph of the mountain danced before me and I couldn't get up to ten. Started puzzling and speculating all over till my brain was numb.... Next it would be old Gentil—and baboons—and babies. I would just begin to doze off and some simple farmyard noise would bring me wide awake again like a shot. The night seemed alive with petty irritations, ghostly comings and goings, whisperings and tiptoeings. Must have been nearly daylight when I did manage to drop off.

Of course then I had to dream—all sorts of topsy-turvy nonsense: Gentil with his great beard and his long arms, turned into a baboon, with hundreds more of them chasing my beauty of the pool—only she had changed, too, into the pinkest kind of baby, her golden hair swathing her in gossamer. She was running, lightly and soundlessly, along that spiderweb trail.... Couldn't see them after her! I tried to call out and warn her, but the right word wouldn't come and my throat choked up so I couldn't let a peep out of me. When she tripped and fell—it was one of those yellow lilies reaching up its long stems and clinging to her little feet—the pack barked exultantly and closed in on her, and I came out of it in a cold sweat, my feet on the floor....

Then I heard Gentil's voice, very low. It seemed to come from the stoep. Slipping to the window, I made out two shadowy shapes there in the thin light of the false dawn. I listened. It was Gentil, a dwarfish native with him, hunched up in the shadow. The old man was clicking away in some outlandish dialect new to me, his voice not much more than a whisper, tense and troubled. He stopped, and the other clicked something back. It was a woman's voice, old and croaky. She didn't bother to whisper, and it struck me she talked a bit too free for a kaffir to a white man. He clapped a hand on her mouth and I could hear his "Hus-s-sh!" That's a word that's plain enough in all languages. There was more palaver and the clink of silver pieces. The old one was on her feet, bent almost double. He gave her something. I could see that much, for the light was brightening fast. The hag slipped away and he stepped inside. The floor creaked as he trod carefully, barefoot.

No more sleep for me. It was time I got up, anyway. Ordinarily I should have theorized to beat the band over that daybreak confab, but things had been coming so thick and fast I didn't think much about it. It was broad daylight when I washed and dressed and the boy had brought my coffee—another glorious morning. The peaks of the range showed all ivory touched with the faintest pink melting into coral, and that shading off into flaming scarlet. A refreshing breeze carried the half-forgotten fragrance of roses. Cows lowed contentedly, waiting to be milked. A horse snickered in some distant field, and I thought of Jean. A young cock crowed shrilly, challenging the waking world. Birds chirped. Somewhere overhead a dove cooed. And, very far away, a baboon's harsh bark woke faint echoes....

That reminded me. I found my host in the living-room (I don't think he had been to bed) and he greeted me courteously. Had I slept well? Was it not a fine morning? Was I ready for breakfast?

I asked, of course, about the missing child. It had not been found, but they had hope—he flushed unaccountably and gave breakfast orders, switching the conversation adroitly. Would I be interested in his experiments in seeking a cure for the horse-sickness?

If any subject holds interest for a white man in Africa, where a horse is his constant companion, it is this. I listened eagerly while he elaborated his theory, my coffee getting cold. We had always been told this terrible scourge was somehow traceable to the dew. Orders were strict against letting our beasts graze in the lowlands while it lay on the grass.

Gentil scouted the dew idea. He was bold enough, in this at least, to oppose the accepted dictum. Sheep minds make the majorities everywhere. Once mounted on his hobby, he rode it gallantly. Far from impracticable, too, for the man who discovers a horse-sickness cure can have about anything he asks in Africa. Comes from a germ, he held. Identify and isolate that germ, then kill its potentialities for mischief by inoculation. Donkeys admittedly are immune. Mules already have been inoculated successfully.

"Simply a matter of progressive experimentation," he claimed, pointing proudly to his own horses as living witnesses. They were turned out on the flat nightly to pasture. Had I seen better? I had not.

"Too soon it is yet with positiveness to speak," said he, the lapse in idiom betraying his eagerness; "but before so long I think I shall show you a treatment by which any horse safely can be salted."^[2]

^[2] Cured, and therefore immune from any recurrence of the malady.

"If you do," I agreed, almost as enthusiastic as he was, "my congratulations in advance, for your fortune's made."

He stopped, peering at me as if confused by a new and not wholly welcome thought.

"That I had not considered," he hesitantly admitted.... "You are probably right. Yet I do not want wealth. It means prominence. I desire but peace. To save the horses was all I had thought of. Always have I loved horses."

There we were on common ground.

Abruptly as he had dismissed the matter of the stolen child, he himself returned to it. The father had been of his household not more than two or three years, a useful and faithful man. The mother had been with him from her childhood. This was their first-born.

"It hits them hard," he said sadly. "He loved the small one almost as though she had been a son."

I asked what new steps he had taken. He did not answer. Thinking he had perhaps not understood, I asked again. He stood up and faced me.

"Last night I said I had broken no law, and I then spoke truth," he declared contritely. "This morning you have lawful right to arrest me. Oh no"—he seemed to read my thoughts—"nothing of which you spoke.... Early this morning I sent for a witch-doctress my people both trust and greatly fear. To them she is all but omnipotent. I sought her aid. I did this knowing the law forbids. We ourselves had done all we could, and to no avail. I had seen the poor mother grieve.... I sent for this ancient woman and I doubled her fee. It was—what is it your sportsmen say?—it was playing the long shot. If the babe is found I am very glad. If not, I have done my best and what they so much desired done; and thereby I have opened to them my heart. It has given them comfort—and new hope. The penalty I will pay!"

The man was a bundle of contradictions. He had begun his confession like a culprit schoolboy. He ended it with dignity. From his standpoint I should not have cared to say he hadn't done the right thing at that. It wasn't anything unprecedented, either, law or no law. We frequently heard of Boer farmers—English, too—consulting the witch-doctors

about lost stock. Yes, and they often got them back. I had no violently virtuous urge to make trouble for him, and I'll admit I was curious myself to see what would happen. So I looked him in the eyes and shook my head.

"Nix understand," I told him. "Never mind, though. We'll let it go."

He seemed for a second bewildered. Then he gave me a whimsical smile, but spoke not another word. I should have liked awfully well to have had a chin with him about these witch-doctors and doctresses, but I'd made that tabu. It was my turn to change the subject, so I inquired about his neighbours. Naturally he hadn't any within two or three days' riding, but it got the ball rolling the way I wanted. He had not, he said (and I could see he was quite sincere), seen or heard of any white women in Sankaeliland since his own wife died. I didn't tell him even then of the girl of the pool. Perhaps I should have.... I don't care to look silly.... Then he went out to see the horses and he showed me about his place. There was reason for his pride in it. I have not seen many such farms, or more contented, willing people.

Strolling about with him, I was several times on the point of speaking of my adventures of yesterday. Something each time intervened. He was much preoccupied. The trivial tragedy of his small domain seemingly weighed over-heavily with him. One naturally sympathizes with one's people in their troubles. It seemed to me he rather overdid it. I had determined to say nothing of my maid of the mountain, but I constantly expected him to ask me how I had come to be there without my horse. Until he asked, I meant to keep a still tongue. Knowledge of secret trails gains in police value when shared with few.

But he did not concern himself as to how I had come, merely asking if my mare would be all right, and perfunctorily offering to send one of his boys for her. We were crossing his farthest meadow, the one by which I had entered the stead, when he stopped to swing a long arm comprehensively towards the cliffs.

"A strange bit of country that, geologically and—otherwise," he remarked conversationally. "You see something of it from here—basaltic and granitic rocks, with occasional limestone intrusion. Yet in the season of the rains the surcharged spruits carry heavy blue clay. Scientifically paradoxical, is it not?"

Not being a rock-hound, I couldn't say. He went on:

"Often I thought, in the earlier days when first I had come hither, that I should like to explore it somewhat. But I never did. And now I shun it and am almost as suspicious of it as are my people. To them it is forbidden country—the dwelling-place of spirits. I have heard it said that in ages past the Little People abode there, and that their paintings and carvings remain.... Thence has come every sorrow I have known in this place of peace. It was there yestermorn the baboon went also. Nor would even the father follow—not to save his child!"

We stood a moment, scanning the lofty steeps, turning then to retrace our steps. To our amazement (mine, at least, for he seemed immune to surprises), a wrinkled creature of unguessable age squatted almost at our feet. Such a travesty of humankind I had never seen before. Not four feet tall, if she had stood erect; bent and crouching, she was a mere horrible pigmy. Her skin wasn't black, like that of the countryside folk, but greenish-yellow, hanging in loose, flapping, over-dry folds. Repulsively reptilian, she moved, despite her years, silently and swiftly; and coiled about her scrawny throat was a puff-adder, somnolent. The bag slung underneath her arm proclaimed her of the sorceress's cult. I guessed her for the witch Gentil had been whispering with in the grey dawn.

And yet it was not to him, but to me, her sunken hawk-eyes turned, boring into mine, searching long. I did not fancy it. The creature was uncanny. Gentil spoke to her as to an equal, almost with deference. And that is not well in Africa. What he said I do not know. It was an uncouth tongue. I assumed they talked of the missing child; but when he turned to me, clearly at the witch's behest, it was to ask of my country, the place from which I had come to Africa, my family, my own inchoate affairs and shadowy prospects. And I submitted to the ridiculous catechising! My host asked it as a personal favour. That over, the crone gave him a muttered message and his melancholy seemed to drop from him like a garment. Smiling, he interpreted.

"The child is safe, she says. We shall have it back to-day."

He turned to the beldame. One skinny hand reached up, and the snake about her neck forsook its resting-place,

slipping down along her withered arm. I stepped back hastily, whereat she cackled hoarsely, instantly adding words as he quickly translated.

"She says to have no fear. It is but her companion, working harm to none that seek not to molest her or the one she serves."

"The snake-god?" I questioned, curious. Much vagrant chatter of snake deities and snake ghosts circulates in those parts.

"Possibly," he replied; "I cannot say. The child we yesterday lost——"

A running rattle of stones sliding down the hillside caused us to look thither. It was but a glance, but when we turned to further question her, the woman was gone.

"They come; they go," said he, meeting my look. "One does not live long years in these parts to chase the tail of mysteries."

As the old woman evidently had directed, he led to where the most densely bushed of three deep kloofs debouched in a thick clump of thorn at the valley's edge. Excitement loosed his laggard tongue. To my thinking he talked a shade wildly. I began to wonder if the lonely years had not touched his head.

"To one who has always lived the white life it may seem mad," he declared defensively; "but my people say (and if she speaks truth I shall not deny it) that these remaining few of the ancient Bushfolk hold speech with the baboons. This doctress has Bushman blood. That the baboons serve the Little People is so fixed a thought with Sankaeli's folk, I was minded to put it to the test.... The woman said the baboon would bring back the babe to-day!"

The words had but passed his lips when a boy came running, naked save for his moocha, sweat shining, for he came swiftly.

"Baas!" he gasped. It was all he had breath for. He pointed to the edge of the farm where the cliffs fall steeply to wall it in, an area lightly bushed, but with three towering blue gums dwarfing the indigenous trees as trespassing poplars in an apple orchard. We quickened our steps, breaking into a run as excited chattering reached us, like the hum of swarming bees. The runner had recovered his wind and romped alongside, erupting explanations. The child had been discovered—or, rather, the baboon had brought it back. A herd boy had been first to see them, the baboon (a full-grown female) carrying her little human doll with evident care, even shielding it from the thorn bushes as they passed through. The alarm had been sounded and the huts had emptied at once; women and boys deserted their fields and flocks and came flying, weariness of the long search forgotten, the father in the lead, a heavy assegai in his hand. His face was lighted with the lust for vengeance.

No wonder panic had seized the baboon, but not all for herself. Protective instinct at least akin to maternal forbade her to desert the child. She had tucked it under her arm and carried it in her rush for safety and shelter to the topmost branches of the tallest gum. There she was cuddling it (we could hear it weakly whimpering), alternately seeking to soothe it and peering down through the leafy tangle to chatter and show her teeth.

What could the people do? To attempt to climb the tree would be childish. The baboon would only scurry to another vantage point, taking the baby with her; or she might drop it, to herself escape. Monkey-minded, she might, too, at any minute lose interest in her child-toy and cast it from her, obedient to some new small-brain motivation. The father, overstrained and impatient, began to climb. The mother sought with sense to hold him.

"No, not that!" Gentil called sharply. "Let the tree alone.... Would you have the child killed, fool?"

His people turned to him with relief. It was the white man's place to think and command. On him was responsibility, in this case of life or death. I thought his first move sound. It was to send all save the father and mother flying to their quarters and to the house for blankets, mats, bucksails,^[3] anything that could be improvised as a net to hold beneath the tree. Reprieved from molestation, the baboon glared less balefully and comforted her small captive. The baby ceased to cry.

[3] Tarpaulins.

It was then I recalled a somewhat like experience a trooper pal named Verey had once told me of. His strategy might work again. I whispered it to Gentil.

"Worth trying," he thought. "I have no better plan."

All tame baboons are inordinately fond of beer. They surmised this was a pet. Show a beer-bottle to any such, and it is like holding out candy or an ice-cream cone to the average youngster. A beer-bottle was brought. It was the wretched mother's task to attract the baboon's attention and tempt her down if possible. We others drew back, keeping very still, a blanket or bucksail to each pair of us. We would do our best to catch if the small one came tumbling through the branches.

"God grant she does not drop it now," the old man muttered huskily.

But she did not. We could see her cock her head to one side, peering curiously down and passing the tot, now seemingly sleeping, to her other arm. Then she swung and dropped lightly to a lower limb, eyes glued on the bottle. The mother had set it down at the foot of the tree and backed quietly away. Our hearts stood still. I stole a glance at the mother, squatting in front of me. Her black shoulders quivered, otherwise she gave no sign of the torment tearing her. That woman had pluck.

Peeking—peering—questioning—advancing—retreating—falling plummet-like in a way to send our hearts into our throats—stopping to scratch herself or to fondle the babe—but, little by little, coming down nearer and nearer, greedy and inquisitive both, it was all of five minutes before that baboon let go the lowest branch and zigzagged down the bare trunk, gripping the bark—still holding to the child.... And the mother crouched there waiting—very, very still—watching with her heart in her eyes. Nerve, what? If they seemed weeks to us, those few minutes must have been years to that kaffir girl.

I suppose we did let out one big sigh of relief when it dropped to the ground—couldn't help it; and that was enough for the baboon. She was just reaching for the bottle when she caught sight of us, and, quick as a flash, she'd grabbed the tree again, still clutching the baby. She wasn't quick enough, though. A heavy revolver barked at my ear—Gentil's. The mother jumped for it like a duiker,[4] and her man was almost as quick as she was, his assegai in his hand, blood-hunger in his eyes.... And the baboon hugged the baby tight, still protecting it while her own eyes glazed, till they stabbed the last life out of her.... Funny thing, the careful way it had held the mite all the time. Their own babies grab and cling to them with all four hands from the day they're born!

[4] A small antelope which, when startled, disappears in the scrub in a succession of leaps and bounds.

Things happened fast after that. The baboon had let out one last wild bark, and almost instantly it seemed to be answered in a human voice! The voice came nearer—clearer—questioning in tone. I turned to stare, dumbfounded, and I saw Her break through the thorn hedge and come running, so light-footed and fluidly she seemed to float—my Golden Girl of the pool!

The others weren't looking. They were crowding around the mother where she sat rocking on her heels, squeezing the baby to her. Her man was kicking and stabbing at the dead baboon, Gentil beside him, his revolver in his hand. She must have sensed in a flash all that had happened, for as the old man wheeled to see what was up, her little assegai whistled through the air and took him fair in the throat. He had had time to drop her before she threw, but his gun hand never came up. He just jerked forward and stared, eyes popping out of his head. And the assegai struck him and he went

down!

I ran to him—alone. His people were racing for their huts as if the devil were after them. And they were all yelling like mad:

"The White Witch! The White Witch of the Little People!"

CHAPTER III

LOVE'S DAWN AND THE ANCIENT WAY

Did I say I was left alone with him? I didn't mean quite that. His people had all stampeded like frightened sheep, but the girl—my Golden Girl—she stayed. When he had slumped down, clutching at his torn throat, she had given just one frightened sob. Nothing of the native about that! But before I could get in action she had plucked out the assegai, and one of her little hands was holding the wound together while the other found his handkerchief and held it out to me. I managed a sort of bandage—one couldn't mistake what she wanted—and she took mine as well. Went right to work, deft as a doctor or a hospital nurse. I'd taken first aid and I knew. Just like a woman, eh? Do the big damage and then turn right round and undo it as best they can!

It looked pretty bad, too. He was losing a lot of blood. The assegai (luckily it was clean) had barely missed the jugular, but a thin whistling sound showed the windpipe had got it. He must have suffered a lot, but you'd never have guessed it. Gritty beggar!

We got him on his pins and he managed to make the house, leaning on both of us. Kept looking at her all the while, mystified like. Didn't seem to remember she had done him in—not a sign of anger or reproach. Just that vague, perplexed look on his face. Made me think perhaps the shock had quite unsettled his mind. The girl acted strangely, too. She had been mad enough to stick him like a pig—meant to do for him properly, no doubt of that—but as soon as he dropped she had let out that one sobbing sort of gasp and was on the job, trying to fix him up. Had a blanket folded and under his head while I was getting my wits together. And all the time we were working with him she kept peering into his face, puzzling over something, it looked like. No tears, though—no hysterics—strictly businesslike.

Even when we'd got him into the house and his bed not one of his own people would come near him, though I called 'em and cussed 'em proper. Wouldn't move hand or foot. Kept close to their huts, jabbering a lot of nonsense. We could catch "Baas" and "Baba" and "White Witch" now and then, but I couldn't make any sense of their chatter.... The girl only jibbed once, when we came to the door. You'd have thought she fancied the house some sort of trap.

The bleeding eased up when we got him laid out flat and the wound cleansed with some peroxide I'd seen in his bathroom. Bandaged his neck tight as we dared and not choke him. I had handed her the basin and she'd gone for more water when he signed for me to come close. His eyes met and held mine while his hand came up, making motions of writing. I fished out my notebook and pencil. It was what he wanted. He scrawled a few words—wasn't such an easy trick, the way he was then. Then he passed me the book to read, watching me close. It took some making out, and at that I didn't quite understand:

"... Always before leaping, look.... No dokktor.... Not detain her.... Accident.... My fault.... In God's name say nothing about her."

His eyes never left my face while I puzzled it out. Seemed somehow that more than gallantry was prompting him,

something altogether beyond me.... It wouldn't do to excite him I knew, so I nodded. He patted my hand. Then he gave me a wan smile, but contented like, and relaxed. I couldn't tell whether he'd dropped off unconscious or slept.

Ten or fifteen minutes slipped by, and the girl hadn't returned. I stepped to the door to see what had become of her and almost bumped into the kaffir table-boy sneaking in, the rest of the house servants at his heels. Sure enough panicky they all were. Couldn't get much out of them, but, putting two and two together, the White Witch had bolted for the hills. Looked nasty for me. A trooper on the spot, seeing a white man about done in, and then palling round with the bloodthirsty witch-woman and letting her give him the slip! One thing sure, though: the old gentleman would stand by if there was any shindy about it—and the natives wouldn't talk. Too precious scared to.

In any case my first business was to get back to the mare and rush a doctor to look Gentil over. That part of my promise rested lightly. I couldn't take a chance with the man's life. Another look round and I'd trek. The patient slept. Tearing a leaf from my notebook, I scribbled a line to let him know I'd be back within a day or two and tiptoed out. I'd a good bit of daylight left if I moved lively—should be on the main track by sundown. Trust Jean to do the rest.

Where the kloof breaks into the lowland, almost where Gentil had stood spouting geology and anthropology, I began casting about for my tiny trail. I knew it began somewhere thereabouts and felt sure I'd strike it if I worked the ground thoroughly. Still, it wasn't so easy to pick up. I was beginning to doubt if I had my right bearings, when I was brought about-face by a croak behind me. It was the old witch-doctress again, but without her pet, the puff-adder. At that she was none too welcome. I had no time to waste. Likely she guessed as much, for she beckoned to me to follow and turned sharp left and marched. I don't quite know why I did, but I trailed along. A stiff pace she set, little and old as she was. And she did put me on the path all right, and quite a bit higher up than where I had come into the farm from it. It hadn't taken ten minutes, and I couldn't have made as much ground inside half an hour. Of course she was looking for bonsela!
[1] I tossed her a tickie.[2]

[1] A small gift.

[2] Threepenny piece, then South Africa's smallest coin.

Instead of catching, or trying to, she let it go by her, grinning toothlessly. Her claw-like hand dipped into that bag of hers and came out with an English half-sovereign or my eyes lied. She sent it flying after my threepenny-bit!

Surprised? Was I? I stood there goggle-eyed, while she came closer; and—funny, isn't it, how a little thing like that will strike you?—I noticed there wasn't any of that sour milk smell of the black to her. They say the Little People are like that. Maybe that's how they make such friends of the jungle-folk? Animals can't smell them as they do the kaffirs?

She brought up a pace or two from me, bending over about double to touch my boot with her skinny hand. Then, straightening up almost to her scant four feet, she lifted her withered arm upraised over her head in salute.

"N'koos, Baba!"

She was my most obedient servant—my very humble slave—my loyal and devoted friend! It amounted to about that. I'd never have picked her for a servant—no, nor yearned for her as a friend. But—never look a gift slave in the mouth, eh? I waited for her next move. It wasn't long. She wanted to know how the Baas was. Who was caring for him? Was I going to bring the policemen to make trouble for her people?

There was a whole lot of difference in the way she had talked with Gentil and the way she spoke to me. It was black slave to white chief—and a mighty humble little black. And she spoke a kaffir lingo I was pretty nifty at, so I could get every word, which was more than I usually could.

I told her I would send a doctor—the rest could wait. We'd see how he came along. Friend of hers, wasn't he?

Plainly he was not. She spluttered and frothed and cursed like a wizened fiend—anyway, it sounded like cursing. I

gathered generally that she'd have much pleasure personally in pushing the old chap round a stake. The dried-up mite of misery almost said as much.

But not her wish or her will counted, she insisted. The Baas was to be made whole speedily. She obeyed. It was the White Chieftainess's command. Should he die, blood would be on the White Chieftainess. Did I want it so?

Crafty old vixen! Of course I wasn't anxious as all that to make a big case for myself. I didn't want the old farmer to die. She knew that well enough, too, and pushed on with her tale.

She had been sent to care for the Baas. Great skill had she, much knowledge of hurts and wounds and herbs and secret potions. She would nurse him as flesh of her flesh—and pretty dried up old flesh it was, I thought.... The White Chieftainess sent further word, and this to me: that if I gave not my promise thus to let matters run, she would cast herself from the kranz where the reim hung!

Everybody seemed to be wanting promises from me! ... Well, you know—naturally I didn't want the girl to do a silly thing like that. I told the old body to trot along. If the Baas was as much better as she promised, when I got back in a day or two—why, we might leave it for him to say what he wanted done. With that she kow-towed again and was on her way.

* * * * *

Of my scrambling journey back to the pool of the lilies and the lily maid I need say little. To me it is ever easier to go up than down. Moreover, the difficulties of the way appeared less formidable. Had I not known it could not be so, I should have said some of the more dangerous passages had been made almost safe since last I had traversed them, not forty-eight hours before. There, where the ooze had slithered under my feet, were stepping-stones of a sort—strange I had not noted them! At the spot where I had feared falling to frightful death, the grassroots proving fickle, was lashed a sapling handrail; blind must I have been before! And certain of the tree-trunks bridging the narrow gorges assuredly seemed more sound, with the look of being new-placed since I had passed over them, descending to the stead!

Yet there were no footprints along that dizzy stairway of the cliffs—no sign of life since the days of the long ago, save for the cooing rock-doves that made the steep walls their airy habitation, and very many baboons, in endless succession, clinging to rock perches above or beside the trail or watching from the tops of stunted trees, at such spaced intervals that almost they seemed posted there as sentinels.

At length I came, with much less toil and time loss than I had counted to spend, to where, by the reim, I had dropped past the overhanging scarp to footing upon the path. The reim still dangled there, securely fast above. Here the trail ended in a blank face of basalt. Above, the roofing rock projected a full four feet. The tiny ledge marking the trail's beginning was less than six feet long and scarcely half that in its width. And where the reim hung loosely in air was naught but a sweeping vista of the secret valley, the cliff precipitous in its swift descent.

Who first had trod that path, doubtless following some hazardous buck-track in the forgotten years? Who so laboriously contrived those crude bridges, hung perilously in space to lash those sapling handrails for other hands to grasp? Most mystifying of all, how had they guessed existence of that overhead fairy bower, alike invisible from below or above? And how, to win to it, negotiated that impassable cornice to reach the mimosa root and fix the reim that now afforded tangible if spidery means of access?

I gave it up. The human brain has its limitations, as have human hands and feet. I scrambled hastily skyward to the nook of the pool and the waterfall, to find it sweetly unchanged. The yellow arum lilies still nodded approvingly to their counterparts in the crystal deeps. The chirpy cascade trilled its small tinkling song. The vagrom breeze caressed the mimosa bloom. No one was in the nook. Vague disappointment stirred me. I scarce had looked for such a miracle, yet still I had dared to hope that She might be there.

Some small trouble I had reaching my banyan branch by which to make back to where I had left the mare. The trick was turned, however, and I cast a farewell glance over my shoulder to that sylvan eyrie, midway between valley and sky. I had proven it quite deserted scant seconds before. *Yet there She was again*—my Golden Girl, almost as I first had seen her!

Again she stood in the limpid pool, so close to the chattering fall that its spray made for her a misty veil. Her necklace, bracelets and girdle gleamed like sapphires; her spun-gold hair was lightly dusted with turquoise blue. In her hand was another cruel light assegai. Her costume was made complete by that same curious moocha or sporran, of a skin wholly alien to Africa, as far as I knew its fauna. And yet she was regally clad—gowned as no earthly princess ever was, in the iridescent hues of the mountain rainbow.

She stood regarding me with tragic eyes and I went down to her. Nor did she this time retreat or lift her trim assegai. Indeed, she advanced to meet me, proud paced and head held high, her gaze never leaving mine. No answer gave she to my greeting, but took a nearer step. Her lip was trembling though her eyes were brave. She held out to me her weapon and I took it, uncomprehending. Then both her small hands were outstretched, while tears lurked just behind the barriers of her long lashes. Still was I mystified until, fearful and hesitantly, she touched the handcuffs hung at my belt—recalling me to my duty!

Duty it plainly was then and there to arrest her. No shadow of doubt intruded. My own eyes had witnessed her assault on the old man—assault with a deadly weapon and indisputable (if unpremeditated), intent to kill. My trooper's oath, the honour of the Force, dictated one course only. Yet that way, perversely, my feet refused to take.... If I had only taken it! The fates prescribe their heaviest punishments for recreants to trust.

I simply could not do it. I could not even think of her as a prisoner haled to the bar of justice—gaped at by lecherous crowds—committed to some vile prison, to herd with verminous malefactors, pariahs of her sex, cut-throat kaffirs, perchance even unspeakable Chinese! My mind and heart revolted at the thought. Indignant, I shook my head.

We faced each other thus: a forsworn man—a dangerous criminal in the stern view of the Law, yet a glowing, a golden girl! Shame should have suffocated, yet I felt no shame, a heady exaltation on the contrary.... And She? She knew—ah, yes, She knew. Knew without the stumbling words wherewith I sought to justify my treason and compromise with conscience. Forthwith She understood. A woman's intuition is as a lightning flash. Two pearly tears were dashed away by an impetuous hand. That little hand swept in a swift arc downward until it touched my foot. Quick then as thought it was held upright above the golden head.

"N'koos, Baba!"

She also was mine to command! And I—I was minded then and there to crush her to my heart... Poor, callow fool, I did not know it then—it was the birth of our love.... I only knew how much I felt for her. The gods were whispering, to comfort, cherish, shield. At confluence were the currents of our two lives. Lip language was unneeded, futile and empty sound-waste when souls thus touch and merge. Silent we stood a space, eyes meeting eyes and mutely eloquent. A shaft of shadow moved across the kranz. Day waned. The spell was broken by the urge of haste. I sought for words. Somehow they must have come to me, for she demurely signified her comprehension and agreement. I must hasten to the Post while yet light served, I told her. By the third sun at longest I should return. And She would meet me then where now we stood? ... Ah, yes, I knew She would!

It seemed but a moment later when Jean whinnied eager welcome, coming to me delightedly—a moment only, for Time had sprouted wings.

The mare, to my amaze, had been but lately cared for. Her glossy coat betokened an industrious brush, and there were fragments of green mealies strewing the turf, abundant sign that she had feasted well. I saddled quickly and we slipped down the trail. Who thus had cared for her I could not surmise. And yet, as we covered swiftly the few leagues to the Post, in the soft radiance of the gathering night of sensuous Transvaal springtime, I scarce gave it passing thought. My brain was very busy none the less—yet it was in a whirl.

* * * * *

Everything was O.K. at the Post. The home mail came in next morning, and, so far as Morton was concerned, the Transvaal could go to pot till he had caught up on the Cup Tie matches. The corporal finished his out-reports while the runner waited.

"Anything in that Gentil business?" he had asked at breakfast.

"False alarm," I told him, and he gave a satisfied grunt. I added that the man was laid up with a bad cut in his neck—accident, he'd said. I'd promised to call on him again in a day or two. Nothing like being truthful and keeping promises, circumstances permitting!

Morton took a turn at patrol while the corporal read the papers and I dug into a kaffir phrase-book. You never can tell when the lingo may come in handy. Stuck to it next day, too, till they wanted to know what exam. I was loading up for.... Somehow I forgot to mention the *poort*[3] I'd found in Sankaeli's Wall. And no one had to suggest an early start when I took the road again to see how the old man was coming along. No use getting the blacks talking by using that secret trail, I thought. So I had the long, hot ride round. It was late afternoon when I made the stead and an *umfaan*[4] ran out to take the mare. "Baas better," he said in response to a first question. I asked if the White Witch had come back, and he closed up like a clam. "*Ikona*,"[5] seemed about the only other word he knew.

[3] Passageway; gate.

[4] Kaffirboy.

[5] "Don't understand."

Gentil was better—a lot. Apart from his neck being tied up and not being able to talk, he looked right enough. The old witch-doctress wasn't about. She would be back, I gathered, to fix him for the night. After a wash-up and dinner we sat on the stoep and talked—that is, I talked. Didn't want to bother him with too much writing, but I did ask him if he'd seen the white girl again, and passed him my notebook and pencil. He seemed reluctant, but finally scrawled an answer in just six words: "I know of no white girl."

Couldn't get him to touch the pencil again—made out writing bothered him. I was trying to figure out what had come over him when the old witch materialized, soundless as a snake. First I knew she was there was when she croaked out to him to go indoors. A bit thick that, from a tramp native to the boss of the place! I was going to give her what-for, but she touched her lips with a bony finger and whispered something I took for "to-night." Kept staring as if she'd look clean through me and clicking away at a great rate. Was not the Baas much better? Had she not kept her word? What more could a doctor have done?

I couldn't see much of anything, but I didn't tell her so. She had made a neat job of his throat. Not a surgeon in the district could have bettered it. Wound sewn up with a bird-bone needle and some native stuff so fine you could scarcely see the stitches. Windpipe patched, too. Good as ever he'd be in a few weeks. Witch or no witch, she was a dandy doctress.

She was fixing him for the night when I asked her what had become of the white girl. She jumped like a shot and then caught herself up, finished her bandaging, and gave him a sleeping-dose. As she slipped out, she motioned me to follow. I did, in a second or two. The stoep was deserted, but her voice came to me in a whisper:

"At the place of the pictures—when the moon walks!"

Making a date with me, the old bag-o'-bones! I started to laugh. Then it struck me: Would the old scarecrow meet me there—or someone else? Wasn't any doubt where she meant—that old gallery with the Bushman paintings. Not a nice place to go mooching round at night! I had my flashlight and my revolver, though—and curiosity. I decided to think it over. But I knew I'd go. The moon, I remembered, would be up about ten.

Gentil fidgeted when I went in. Wanted to know where I'd been. I told him I'd just stepped outside for a breath of air, and he grabbed the pencil again and scribbled:

"See anyone?"

As a matter of fact I hadn't—only heard. I shook my head. That seemed to satisfy him, and I said good-night.

"Hard ride to-day," I told him. "Pretty tired. Think I'll turn in."

I didn't, though. Stood looking out of the window to the black outline of the range and the velvet sky, almost level with the peaks, sprinkled with stars like diamonds. The perfumes of the night flooded the balmy air—roses and honeysuckle, mimosa and peachbloom—Europe and Africa! An owl hooted, high in the grove of gums. From the herders' huts a tomtom throbbed monotonously. The moon peeped over the crest of the high hills. Mustn't let it show me to the kaffirs when I crossed the stead, so I threw a leg over the sill and dropped to the ground. By the time the farm was bathed in fluid silver I was well under the cliffs, my flash coming in handy to find the trail. Once on it, I made out all right.

Nothing happened until I stood in that ancient gallery, myriads of bats wheeling overhead and only the hooting of that distant owl and the measured drip of water somewhere along the cliff breaking the soothing silence of the night.... There was no one there. I began to wonder if I had got the old hag right. This surely was where she had meant? My watch said ten o'clock. A new note suddenly intruded—a serpent's sibilant hiss! My flash swept a swift circle about my feet.

"Nay, have no fear"; assurance came from out of the darkness. The voice was that of the pigmy seeress, although I could not glimpse her. "The snake of my house will harm thee not," she added hastily. "I thank my master for that he is here. But well I knew thou wouldst come."

"Where are you?" I asked sharply, annoyed and disappointed. "What do you want with me? Make end of this nonsense!"

"Be not vexed with thy servant," she answered. "Patience—a little patience! ... The message of the White Chieftainess waits, and the night ages. Thou hast much to learn. For here begins a new trail—for thee new, yet old when to-day's world was young. Enter then upon the road of thy destiny, treading it without fear, since thou walkest in favour of the ancient gods. Happiness and power await thee—let but thy faith be strong!"

The voice was no longer the cackling croak by which at first I had recognized the crone. Stronger now, more resonant, it rose in a chant, echoing weirdly in that deserted place of many shadows. I felt minded almost to turn back, yet something held me—some strange compulsion stronger than my own will. I could not understand.

The voice seemingly had issued from the dark centre of the gallery, where grew a mimosa bush, stunted but very thick, scenting the air with its bloom. On this I turned my light.

"That puny light thou needest not," the voice droned on, "for to thee, first of living men, it is given to walk in the light of the wise ones of the long past.... Follow, then!"

With the words, the mimosa was parted as a curtain by unseen hands, revealing in a semi-phosphorescent glow that issued therefrom a rough-hewn portal from which ran an ancient passage into the mountain's heart. In this rude gateway stood the withered seeress, wrapped in her bones and snakeskins, a fur *kaross*^[6] draped loosely across her shoulder, the adder coiled tightly upon her thin wisps of hair, its upraised head waving gently to and fro, its eyes agleam like jewels in a fantastic head-dress such as Isis's priestesses were wont to wear. The flooding light, now streaming from within, was richly amber, but of no torch or lamp, an emanation, rather, from the walls themselves, and in the witch's hand was a little wand, its tip likewise alive with this redly-golden glow.

[6] A native cloak peculiar to South Africa; usually an oblong sort of fur rug, unshaped.

"Touch not the walls," she cautioned. "The light of wisdom is both life and death!"

The radiant passageway ended abruptly in a lofty octagonal chamber, hugely proportioned, the walls opalescent green, in jade-like panels alternated with paintings finer and brighter than those of the outer gallery. Sun and weather had taken of these no toll. In this grim yet stately hall only the high ceiling exuded that golden light, so warmly luminous as, like the sun, to dazzle; and the vast place was bare, save at its very centre, where stood a massive chair wrought of dull bronze or copper, on a great ebony block.

The paintings on these inner walls were deeply incised, so that the pictured objects stood out in form as in colour, uncannily realistic. Buck, koodoo, hartebeeste and giraffe were there, with other veldtland creatures, and some now held by scholars to have been but mythical or symbolic. The colours were mainly black and white, rich reds and golden yellow; and there were figures also of men and women—grotesque, diminutive beings, armed with short, heavy bows and slender arrows of reed. All looked to be crowned with interlacing snakes—titular deities possibly. These pigmy humans were painted a greenish-yellow. In this, it suddenly struck me, was close resemblance to the beldame who had guided me thither; and all the pictured people had at least the suggestion of tails, in the case of the females mere apron-like flaps or folds.

Faintly outlined as background were trees and desert stretches, white-crested hills and deep blue waters, the flora and vegetation indisputably northern, quite foreign to Africa; and filling the central panel, in pigment of royal blue, were triangles, circles, squares, stars, and other geometrical figures, with markings that I, unversed in antiquarian lore, took possibly for writings of some not altogether barbaric race. I was minded to try to puzzle out meanings from these strange hieroglyphics. An urging voice beside me checked my intent.

"The past is lived," it droned. "The page of the future is blank. The present calls!"

Mechanically I followed her to that huge chair, whereon she signed that I should seat myself, though this I would not do. She squatted on her heels, staring into the dust and mumbling.

"You had a message?" I reminded her.

"I have for thee two words," she answered, her eyes upon the ground. Her voice once more had dropped to the sing-song chant of the dreamer. "From Her I serve is one—she goes upon a journey. She greets her lord with this telling; and when her journey is made she keeps her tryst in the hidden kloof where Tagelash^[7] watches over the outlander's stead."

[7] A spirit of the still pools reputed to steal young women, yet treat them kindly underneath the waters.

"When shall that be?" I asked, irritation I doubt not showing in my tone.

"That I may not say," she answered. "It was her time to go to the high mountains, leaving maidenhood at their feet. Her womanhood gained, she hath her duty to the Little People. To this end have the gods shaped many destinies."

I hate to try to make sense of these native rigmaroles.

"Talk straight talk," I cried, "and tell where she has gone, and why. When comes she back? What does she ask of me?"

For once she replied directly. The girl had gone on her pilgrimage, with others of her years. She would return when the "school" was over. When this was, I should know, for the Princess desired me to meet her then at the pool. Meanwhile she besought my silence, lest harm befall her.

I had heard something of these so-called pilgrimages and schools, through which youths and maidens pass to manhood and womanhood in that land. Who in the Transvaal has not? At a certain period in their lives the young people are taken up to the peaks, a witch-doctor in charge of the boys—a doctress with the girls. No clothing is permitted, nor contact with the veldtland world. Exposure to cold and storms is held to toughen the body. Tasks likewise are set, to test

and develop courage, resourcefulness, patience, stoicism. The girls are instructed in crude domestic arts, the properties of curative, and medicinal herbs and tonic potions, the tenets of their pagan beliefs. No one may see either boys or girls during these schools of theirs. Only the mothers may bring food for them, which they set down in earthenware dishes at appointed places. Should a child die under the discipline, often severe, the mother's platter is broken. No more is ever known.... A patrol of ours once ran into one of these schools. Our men were chased into Olifantsfontein, seventy miles. Only good horses saved them. I myself have seen the novices from afar, moving white specks upon the mountain top.

"I once saw such a pilgrimage from a great distance," I told the witch. "Yet all therein seemed white?"

"The girls are painted white," she made reply. "It long has been our law, so that when the Fair Princess should come it would be a sign for all."

She halted there, gazing fixedly at the dust. I sought to break in upon her brooding, but at a gesture forebore.

"And now the Princess hath come," she at length went on. "She hath come as was foretold—and thou also, n'Koos! For thou as well as She hath a place apportioned in the Great Plan toward the fulfilment of which the seed was sown in forgotten time. Think not it was by chance thou camest into this alien land, for all things that be are ordered, even from the beginning. Not by chance either was it tossed from mouth to mouth that this *schelm*[8] Gentil (she turned to spit upon the hard-packed ground as she named the farmer) trafficked in forbidden guns, as indeed he doth not, so that thou shouldst be borne hither on the wings of Duty. Nor was it chance that turned thee from the known track, to follow the hidden path no other white foot hath trod—the old, old way of the Little People these *Amaxosas*[9] account bewitched and that led thee to the Chieftainess and her service——"

[8] Rascal.

[9] Kaffirs.

"Hold on there," I interrupted, annoyed and mystified.

"Is it not so?" she demanded. "When she smote the man, didst thou not suffer her to go, not knowing then if he should live or die? Even when she did point the way of thy duty, didst thou not let her again depart?"

"That was the Baas's doing," I argued lamely. "He made of it an accident and enjoined me that I speak not of the girl."

"And was it for that thou saidst naught at thy Post of the way thou hadst found through our mountains?"

"How know you that?" I questioned, surprised and angered. "Are you a reader of minds?"

"In this trifling thing there were no need," she answered calmly. "I have but to twist small threads to make a rope. Yet in the measuring of men's minds I have indeed some skill, for long have I served the ancient Wisdom. The time approaches, if the gods permit, when I at last may rest. Now only I am left of those all-wise and all-powerful in the ages past, to hand on the torch of knowledge lest it be blotted out. And I grow weary, for the years' burden weighs. Therefore in part it is that thou hast been called hither, that thou mayst learn what is demanded of thee and of that White Princess who hath come to us at last, her life merging with thine as the spirits foretold. Perils encompass her and hands of hate stretch forth on every side, to frustrate or set back the purposes of the deathless ones, albeit She knoweth it not as yet.... By thee and by thee alone may She be saved, and with her the secret lore of that race which elsewhere with me perishes."

There was in her mien a flickering up of strangely compelling authority, and in her voice a note of tragedy. She had cast before her upon the ground her handful of knucklebones,[10] over which she now bent, peering and mumbling. The adder slipped to her feet, and (having no mind for closer acquaintance with it or other reptiles, of which I suddenly bethought me that vast and gloomy cavern must hold its many broods), I mounted hastily the ebon block, sitting myself down there in that huge chair. At once the withered crone touched again with her hand my boot, then stood erect, to

address the tremendous emptiness as though it were peopled, as doubtless it once had been, by a great multitude.

[10] The common practice of African soothsayers is to use a collection of small bones, the future being read from the form they take when thrown.

"Give heed ye all, for here indeed begins the appointed end!" she chanted exultantly, her shrill piping uncannily loud in that vast and empty place. "Fulfilment of the prophecies is at hand, for as the time draws near that I surrender my trust, hath it not been foretold that a tall chief, like unto Her in stature as in colour, shall cross great waters to seat himself on the throne of her Chief Minister and thus to serve Her!"

To me she turned then again, signing fealty and homage.

"The spirits of the countless marching generations of the ages speak through me, lord," she intoned impressively. "Let not thine ears be shut nor thine heart be hardened. Harken unto the end!"

A moment she studied the scattered bones upon the floor, through and around and over and about which the adder twined and twisted, weaving fantastic patterns, else did imagination sadly trick my eyes.

"I see," she chanted with lifeless slow monotony, "a messenger hasting hither, to dwell for a space in the unseen world companioned by hovering Death, yet unafraid. And with him is another through whom (unwitting slave) the purpose of the gods is, alas, delayed, and these two pale-skinned agents of the immutable Law are doomed to wander long, distraught and desolated, by black despair beset until Light comes again.... Wars and storm-wrack and death and ruin in this so fair land.... Rivers bank-high with blood—blood of Bhagwan,[11] of Boer, of Englander as well.

[11] Zulu.

"My lord goes down into the deeps, living long in the grim shadowland, companioned by griefs, in agony of mind. For him sun no longer shines nor do birds sing or any flower bloom. Hate holds his bridle-rein, leading far into dread darkness, the Way lost and by him forgotten. Death mocks and flees when he would embrace the god of the great transition. His heart is turned to stone and his blood to water. He peers through prison bars yet courts not freedom from aught save life itself. For him a limitless emptiness of all save madding memory. An outcast wanderer, vainly he seeks oblivion in far lands until—until——"

The strangeness of the scene, the time, the unearthly all-pervading light, the atmosphere of ages dust-embalmed, doubtless had laid on me their heavy spell. Some occult compelling factor of her mind or madness, even in such fantastic monologue, had held me mute and motionless till then. Cold hands of a malevolent invisible host seemed to reach out, clutching. To my distraught imagination, leering fiends were massed in spectral battalions in that infernal subterranean stronghold of the dead, to pull me down and down.... To escape such hideous nightmare of the wandering mind it seemed that I must rally the uttermost resources of my soul. Gasping and sweat-bathed, I leaped down from that great black daïs....

Followed such sudden peril as racks the nerves. I had sprung forward, all forgetting the fearsome machinery of her mummery the witch had spread about her upon the ground. Something slimily soft slithered beneath my foot and I fell heavily. Then, swift as lightning flash, I saw the adder's head drawn back for the darting death-stroke. But strangely swifter was the aged doctress. Her little wand flashed by the serpent's head. I did not see it touch the venomous thing—yet it was forthwith dead!

The witch, thus having saved my life, forgot me quite, to prostrate herself in the dust before that still-writhing thing, rocking and crooning to it, the while I bolted in panic from the awesome place, trembling and filled with fear of I knew

not what—desiring only the cool, clean breath of the honest wind and the sight of the open world.... Silvery mist of moonbeams filtering through the rock-hewn portal at length gladdened my tortured eyes. Recklessly I plunged toward it. Faintly, as a distant whisper, I heard an imploring voice far, far behind me:

"Return ye, lord, and listen to the end!"

Nothing on earth could have got me back in that charnel-house again. I groped and stumbled on, fearing I knew not what. The night breeze brought heavy-sweet fragrance of the mimosa bloom, and at the instant there rang in my ears a strangling, despairing cry....

"The old witch dies," I thought. Yet I could not go back to see what had befallen. Undoubtedly she was mad—she or else I?

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGIC STONE AND MEISJE

Of how I reached the stead I have scant remembrance. My brain was in a whirl. The huts and farm-folk slept in the tranquil moonlight. I fell in with no one until I stood again by my window. My hands were on the sill, for I thought to return as I had left, when a lengthened shadow fell on the farmhouse wall. Turning quickly, I was barely in time to see a stalwart kaffir stride swiftly toward the herders' quarters. He must have seen me, yet he gave no sign. It mattered little, I reminded myself, whether he talked or not. He could not have seen me ere I regained the farm. One thing impressed itself: that big fellow was a stranger, superior to the class in Gentil's service. In the glimpse I had had of him, he had looked an *induna*.^[1] I watched till his straight, muscular form was lost in the gloom of the huts. Then, vaulting the window, I was soon in bed, though sleep long withheld itself, and, when it came, was fitful, broken by horrid dreams. I was up with the first streak of day, even before the house folk.

[1] Headman, counsellor or captain.

In the living-room I found Lydekker's book on the table. Having time then to kill, I picked it up and read more carefully his description of the Marbled Cat. The picture of the little furry creature struck me as strangely familiar, yet I had never been in India nor specially interested myself in animals of that country. Understanding came in a flash: that pictured pelt was an exact replica of the uncommon moocha of the White Witch, as they had named her. How could she have become possessed of such a skin in this far corner of the African highveldt? Once more I pored over the elaborately scientific description, with quickened interest. Its habitat was very exactly defined, yet might it not be found in the Transvaal also? While still I pondered this possibility, Gentil joined me.

His glance turned instantly to the book and he fumbled for paper and pencil. But the chit he passed me was merely a morning greeting. While I replied perfunctorily, his pencil again was busy.

"A rare and peculiar feline," he had scrawled. I nodded agreement, remarking casually that even books of science sometimes were wrong. Had he ever thought its habitat might possibly extend to the African highlands? His eyes at this suggestion betrayed excitement—a scientist's enthusiasm, I assumed.

"I myself killed one many years ago on the Dihang river," he commented. "But I have never seen or heard of it on this continent." He seemed to check an impulse to write more, watching me questioningly.

"Did you notice that girl's moocha?" I asked. He paled perceptibly and began a nervous pacing of the room. Then,

dropping into a chair, he scribbled again and resumed his restless promenading. This time his writing was barely decipherable.

"I had such a skin when I came hither," I managed to make it out, "but lost it years ago. It has perchance been found."

That certainly was a rational explanation, and my picture of myself as a scientific discoverer faded. Yet why should he be so obviously worked up about a matter thus logically disposed of?

Breakfast over, I planned to start back for the Post at once, so as not to lose the morning's cool. Jean had been watered and brought round, and I was saddling up when the old farmer stalked toward me, and at the same instant I caught sight of a tall, dignified kaffir—a ringed-man of middle age, whom I knew instinctively for the one I had caught sight of in the moonlight. He, too, was turning out from the stead. Gentil saw I had noticed him.

"One of Sankaeli's people," he wrote hastily. "The king has been losing cattle and requires the witch to find them."

My mind leaped instantly to that sombre court in the mountain's heart where I last had seen her rocking and moaning over her dead snake. Her anguished cry rang in my ears anew. I wondered if she still lived or lay stark in that vast and empty audience room of a vanished race. But as to that and my night's adventuring, prudence counselled silence.

"Have you sent for her?" I asked, since he seemed to await response.

Once more he hesitated before writing.

"It was a *white witch* he sought," I read over his shoulder. "I told the messenger I knew of none such—it was old Zeete I had summoned when the child was taken and who got it back for us."

"Well, and what then?" I questioned. "Is he"—I pointed to the disappearing kaffir—"is he going the right way to find her? Or do you send her after him?"

He seemed to study overmuch on so plain a question. At length, however, he wrote, and I read with growing surprise while the mare capered and curveted:

"He said a *white witch* was commanded. He goes now to make report.... Keep touch with me, friend, for indeed I know not what goes forward. Many things perplex, of which I may not speak till I know more. If need arise, I will send. Will you then come in haste?"

Of course we would—that was part of our job, I told him. Privately I made up my mind, as Jean danced away with me, that I'd be the one to go if he ever called on us at the Post. Promise of adventure challenged; mystery rode the air. And now that I was once more in the saddle, and the straightforward sunlight, I was a bit sore at myself for streaking it like a scared bunny out of that musty cavern with its weird old paintings and its unearthly light. Yes, I'd certainly have to go back there some time and have a look round.... And I wasn't forgetting that I'd promised to meet that same White Witch at the mountain pool.

So busy was I with my tumbled thoughts that I gave scant heed to the road and scarcely a word to Jean as we pressed on in the mounting heat. Happenings of the day and night crowded—confused—detached—incoherent: the unaccountable adulations of that wrinkled sorceress; the awesome cave chamber with its magical glow; Gentil's peculiar actions and half-confessed fears; that marbled catskin moocha the girl had worn; the nerve-trying maunderings of the wizened seeress and her blood-chilling prophecies; hints of lurking perils menacing my sprite of the hidden kloof; that messenger of ill omen of whom Zeete had spoken! Hot as the day had grown, I shivered with apprehension, of what I knew not.

The mare, missing usual caresses, soon ceased her coquettish curvetings and rushed swiftly on. I should, of course, have checked her had not my thoughts been elsewhere.

That messenger? The ringed-man at the stead? Could the old witch have known of his coming and thought to play on my scant credulity? He had sought the White Witch and she was gone. Gentil denied her existence—stranger still. The

old man's every move hinted of irritating concealments; the one thing definite in the maze of contradictions in which he seemed enmeshed was his constant thought to shield the girl, from something of which I knew naught. I, too (I could not deny it), was shielding her. Why had I said nothing about her at the Post, taken no steps to find out who she was? Some strong but subtle force seemed to have sealed my lips.... The ancient hag had said our fates were intertwined. I laughed at the idea—and yet I cherished it. Where was that laughing sprite now? Beset by savage enemies? My pulse quickened and I halted, half-minded to turn back. Jean looked inquiry. Not until then had I noticed she was lathered and trembling. Reproaching myself, I dismounted, to run a hand over the steaming neck. Seldom had I so misused her....

Only then did I notice we were again at the outlet of the secret trail, and the hour little more than noon! Poor Jean! She followed daintily as I passed round the great moss-covered boulder to the cool of the thick-bushed kloof. Loosening the girths, I left her to cool and graze while I sat with my back to a rock, the spruit gurgling at my feet. Ensconced thus comfortably in the refreshing dimness, lulled by the rippling stream, no doubt I dozed. The snapping of a twig brought me bolt upright, to find myself not alone. My Jean, as a rule resentful of any stranger's touch, stood a few yards away, relaxed delightedly, while Zeete massaged her slender legs, crooning to her the while. I watched her curiously. Like all her cult, she had an uncanny way with animals, but it amazed me that my mare, high-spirited and fiery, should be so tractable under another's hands.

Seeing me watching her, the sorceress gave Jean a parting pat and came slowly to me, looking older and feebler since even the night before. Sadness appeared to weigh upon her and some dignity of her years. Quietly she greeted me, with praise of Jean as from a knowledgeable lover of horses.

I thanked her for care of the mare, whereat she smiled and muttered that they were old friends. Followed a long silence. I knew it was by no accident she was there, yet wondered how she had guessed at my halting as I had not intended. She had seen no messenger from Sankaeli, so she said, when I told her he sought her, to recover cattle.

"He seeks not me," she sorrowfully responded. "Nor are cattle missing from the king's kraal."

"Why should my lord and his servant thus play at words?" she abruptly asked, her tired eyes upon me. "Ill winds have borne to the black chief's ear what I have long kept from him. He has heard of my mistress; now he would straightway see her; and, having seen, he surely would desire. What he desires, he takes.... Wouldst thou see the lamb snared for the lion's lair?"

The time seemed ripe for fuller understandings.

"If you would have my help, in what I know not, forgo this mummery," I told her. "Who is this white maid and what does she here, leading the kaffir life? You call her Chieftainess—Princess. These others name her witch. Read me the riddle. Our lives, you say, follow the selfsame road. Speak plainly, then, lest my feet be tangled in the skein of ignorance."

Her hand fell forthwith to the bag strung beneath her arm. Frowning, I shook my head.

"Straight talk—no more foolery," said I. "Last night we had overmuch nonsense."

The faded eyes flashed sudden indignation.

"So it is ever!" she cried. "We name as mummery that which is beyond our ken. All knowledge is but nonsense to the dull. The white man thinks he alone hath wisdom.... He strings his singing wires across the land to speed his messages—yet we simple folk, when we have word for far places, need no such trumpery."

The "underground telegraph" is one of Africa's many closely-guarded secrets. That gave me food for thought.

"Last night the spirits of my dead were with me to aid thee, lord," the pigmy seeress went on. "It was their kindly wish that thou shouldst not blindly follow where the fates shall lead—the path that in the coming months thy lagging feet must tread. My lord had need of counsel, yet he would not harken. My lord hath need of sight, yet closed his eyes. My heart is heavy for him, but he binds my hands."

"That was indeed a cheerful tale——"

"Thou wouldst not hear me through," she interrupted. "Much more there was——"

"No," I denied her sharply. "I listen not. Keep you your magic for those who believe in it, being of your blood and custom. I am white. That girl, too, is white. Who, then, and what is she, and how comes she here?"

"That I may not say now," she answered, "for the time is not come. She is one I serve truly as the gods command, and dare to love as though I had suckled her mother and my blood indeed flowed in her veins as it is believed.... Since thou wilt stop thine ears to the voice of Truth, little more may I speak. But, since through thee Her destiny must be accomplished, this will I say: Remember when thy days be midnight and Death spurns thee:

"Out of Darkness is the Sun reborn. Spring treads on Winter's heel. The price is great, but greater the reward. And when thou hast crossed black waters and sitteth at the feet of a doctor of thine own kind and colour, harken thou to his words, since in mine thou hast not faith. Long will be the way, beset by sorrow. Yet shalt thou find happiness and favour of the ancient gods *when at the last thou hast passed through the waters of thunder* to fulfilment of thy destiny—and Hers."

She spoke as one inspired, and, though I could make no meaning of her wild talk, I heard her to the end.

"When she doth send, thou wilt surely come?" she questioned, dropping her chanting drone. "I indeed grow feeble and need thine aid. Thou asketh me of the White Chieftainess. Ask rather the maid herself; her lips were redder and sweeter for the telling. Therefore wilt thou believe them."

She fumbled in her pouch and brought out a whitish stone—quartz of some sort, I judged.

"Take thou this token," she urged, laying it in my palm, "nor ever part with it, for its power is great. Many there be who for but the smallest bit would give many cattle and slaves and secrets of the land—for hearts are drawn thereto as water to the sun."

The native mind is crammed with superstitions and all the doctors and doctresses drive a brisk trade in charms. To humour her I took the bit of stone and dropped it in my pocket. Yet scarcely had I done so than it seemed suddenly a thing alive. In some alarm I felt for and brought it forth. My knife and keys were glued to it as though part of the stone itself. At that I in some measure understood. White magnet-stone figures largely in kaffir legend, valued beyond gold or diamonds, though never had I heard of any having seen it. Infallible as a love charm, the natives say.

In black magnet-rock no such occult power is held to rest. In truth it is common enough in certain parts. We had a police post called Magnet Heights, such rocks all thereabouts, with little vegetation. The paths and open spaces were very bare and clean, free from all dust. When a shod horse passed over them he was easily followed, for the tiny particles of this magnet-stone stand upright wherever iron touches, like little patches of black fur. It was a healthful post. In storms the lightning incessantly struck the mountain at its back. But the post was always safe.

With difficulty I separated my knife and keys, giving the luck-stone a pocket to itself. It was a worthwhile souvenir, I reflected, nor dreamed how in a later day it should save my life—nor how I should come to hate it because of that.

* * * * *

We had plenty to do that next month, picking up stray coolies, nabbing a few Zulu envoys we couldn't get a thing on (or out of), and running down a thieving bunch that had been lifting the missionary's stock. It was the day after I got back from Gentil's, too, that I ran across that Irish-Australian. Found him down by the river, all in with fever, and lugged him to the Post, where we nursed him back to health. Interesting sort, he was—a wizard with horses. Claimed he could cure a mare of the sickness every time, but couldn't work the trick on horses—didn't see why. Had his old clothes sewn full of sovereigns and nothing but a rusty tin of dripping to go on with when I picked him up. Hoofing it to Pretoria, so he said, and had tried a short cut. Didn't say where he'd come from or what he'd been doing. Queer stick—likeable at that.

I had had a hard day on patrol and had pulled off my boots to rest the feet while we sat gassing after supper, the

Aussie and I. Neither of us had heard a sound and the dogs hadn't let out a yip, though they generally kicked up a frightful shindy if they smelled kaffirs about. We didn't even hear the door open, when a flower came sailing through the room and lit on the table, right by my hand. We both jumped for the door as it was closing, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Odd thing, that!" I said as we came in.

Our accidental guest had flopped down at the table. He was pretty shaky yet. The flower lay there and he picked it up, studying it curiously.

"I can understand a lady heaving posies at you, handsome big boy," he drawled, joking as usual. "But I'm blest if I ever saw one just like this before, and I'm something of a shark on botany. Might be the Royal Lily."

I hadn't given the flower a thought till he passed it over. Knew it then like a shot for one of those arum lilies the hidden kloof was full of. Guessed what it meant, too. Must have looked the silly blighter, for he went off in a fit of laughter.

"Guilty as charged!" he chuckled. "Question now is, who's the lady?"

Up to that I hadn't opened my mouth to a living soul—and I'd only known this chap a week. Didn't even know his name or a thing about him but the very little he'd told us, and that shady. Somehow I'd taken to him, though, for one of our own sort. I'd naturally been thinking a lot about things over Gentil's way. Couldn't make head or tail of the mess. Well, anyway, I elected him father-confessor and spun my yarn. Sounded crazy enough when I told it, but he didn't once interrupt, and he didn't laugh.

"An odd bag of tricks," he commented. "But then this is Africa.... You shouldn't have legged it from that little séance till your old crow had rung down her curtain; don't know what you may have missed.... But the girl, now, that's another horse. Quite certain she's white?"

Of course I was, and I said so. A little huffy I may have been about it.

"There, there! steady it is!" he cut in. "She's a Swede if you say so, and a crown princess to boot. Might be at that. Chief's albino daughter or something of the sort. Account for a lot, eh? Blood's weight to carry in these parts. They've a very pretty trick of strangling royal children occasionally, as p'raps you've heard—jealous queen-cats, king's orders, or some such rot."

That was common enough talk. One of our fellows, I remembered, had found two babies dead near a watercourse. His report had been promptly quashed. "Policy," the O.C. explained.

Yet something told me my Golden Girl was no albino kaffir, princess or plebeian. I wasn't any nearer guessing who or what she was, but our sundowner's talk got me thinking of her harder than ever, and I hadn't forgotten how worked-up old Zeete had been—Gentil also—over Sankaeli sending for her. I liked the idea of that lily as a messenger, too. Would have started right off that night if I could have wangled it; but I wasn't my own boss by long odds. Couldn't hatch up a ripe excuse. As it happened, I didn't have to. While I sat racking my brain for an idea, the corporal rode up and came stamping in.

"Guess you're elected again," he broke the news. "Got a tip there's a couple of Zulu envoys headed for Sankaeli's kraal. Ought to overhaul 'em. You know the lay of the land."

Nothing could have suited me better, though I tried not to let on. Our rag-tag visitor grinned through a cloud of smoke.

"I'll take a turn over that way," I agreed, casually as I could make it. "Where'd the info' come from? Straight, is it?"

"Well, among us three," he confessed, "it was a bit odd. Ran across one of those mangy witch-doctresses coming along, and she spilled the beans—simple-minded soul, old as the hills. Liked to hear herself gabble. Never dreamt she was giving the show away."

A wink was the Aussie's comment. Luckily the corporal missed it. I'd a fair notion myself who the chatterbox was; and I certainly admired the smooth way she'd worked things. I'd get hold of our Zulu friends if they really existed (I had my doubts) and have time to spare if I took the secret trail. Suited me fine.

Our guest turned out at daybreak to see me off. The others weren't up yet.

"That was your sorceress I'd judge," he said as I forked the mare. "Strikes me she's no fool. Might be good business for you to play up to her. They can be heaps of help if they have a mind to, and you seem to be the fair-haired child with this one.... But keep an eye out for tricks if you bump into the old Chief. He's pretty thick with the Zulus just now; cute enough not to make a breakthrough till he sees how the land lies.... Give my homage to Her Royal Highness if you should happen to meet her."

His eyes twinkled as he waved me away.

We hit a smart pace till I'd made the big rock; had the road all to ourselves. Going up the kloof I kept a sharp look-out for Zeete; felt pretty sure she'd bob up somewhere. But it wasn't till I had got to the trailhead that she came hobbling out of the bush to take the mare.

"The two whom you seek are at the painted rocks," she told me as I swung off. "They sleep soundly. Also they are fast bound."

That was fixing things for me with a vengeance! I didn't know just what to make of it.

"Now that thou hast naught to concern thee," she went calmly on, "it may be in thy heart to visit the fountain where Tagelash watches—and one waits. Afterwards I have words for thy ear."

I stayed for no more, but began clambering round the great barrier rock. Her quavering voice trailed after me:

"I wait on the lower path!"

Swinging myself down, to my chagrin I found that quiet nook deserted. I searched and shouted in vain. When I stooped to peer over the kranz, thinking She might be on the lower trail, why, She was *there*, close behind me, laughing at my amaze! I turned to question her of how she had come thither, but before I knew it was holding her in my arms, all I had meant to say forgotten.... I only knew that she was very dear.

The sun had begun to drop towards the crest of the ridge ere I sought to quizz her, calling the kaffir phrase-book to my aid. Who was she? Whence came she there? Her shy responses gave no clue. Her name, as I made it out, was in the Sesuta, Masselene. Meisje I re-christened her as much better. She knew not why until I made it clear. It is the Dutch for flower—Maisie, as we would say in English.

She was, time and again she insisted (for I could not credit it), grand-daughter of Zeete, the witch-doctress. Parents she had never known. Her mother, long since dead, had been a chieftainess, the grand-dame had often told her. Of her father she knew little. Zeete had named him an evil man whom the gods would punish. The mother, in their tongue, had been called "The Woman of Tears." She herself had always lived with Zeete, learning her ways and wisdom. They had never once been parted until lately she had been called, with other maidens of the country, to a school on a distant peak to which she pointed with trembling finger. Thence she had returned but two suns since. "Up there" she had suffered, yet had she held her head high, keeping pride and place.

How she could come and go thus swiftly and soundlessly to and from the pool she would not say.

"Of that I may not as yet speak, even to thee," she pleaded, nor could I break her will. And when she saw that I was vexed with her, the rosebud mouth quivered and the blue eyes filled. She brushed away a threatening tear. It ill becomes a chieftainess to weep.

In all the years of her life, seventeen (she checked them off on her fingers) until I had come to her "from the sky," she had seen none of her own colour since her mother "went to the ghost people."

"Not even the Baas below?" I asked in surprise. "Him you struck down almost to his death?"

At that she crimsoned and paled, shaking her golden head.

"Him I had never seen," she declared, perplexed. "Never had I gone down to the stead until that day I followed upon the trail, fearing that thou wouldst fall. It was commanded not.... I sinned in going thither, and see how swiftly evil befel. For when he had cruelly slain my baboon (which had indeed harmed none) in sudden passion I struck, meaning to kill even as he had killed. A wicked spirit filled my heart with anger—until I saw his face. Then sorrow and shame were mine, for he was one who in the long ago oft came to me when sleep gives our helpless bodies into the keeping of the watchful dead. In such a vision it must have been, for we had never met."

She rocked on her heels, sobbing softly. I sought to comfort, but she put me from her.

"Nay, I am a wicked girl," she insisted piteously. "I did break the law, heeding not my duty. Also I would have shed blood. Punishment is meet."

To cheer her I would have made light of the matter, for the man was little harmed and bore no malice—even had besought silence concerning her, as I pointed out, and had told Sankaeli's *induna* he knew her not. Her eyes opened wide at that, amazed and much alarmed.

"How knew the king of me?" she questioned, trembling. "Our servants have speech for no other ears than ours, nor could they be untrue. Mischief indeed breeds quickly. What more shall my disobedience bring to pass? My head is in the dust. Leave thou me now, lest I work harm to thee, beneath whose feet I would put my life."

Remorse and contrition marked her self-abasement, yet there was in her mien unconscious dignity and regal pride. Her innocent avowal of frank regard made music on my heartstrings. My arms reached out, and, passionless as a child, she crept to them.

"This must indeed end all," she faltered, "for with thee I am wax. My will melts in thy eyes as snow the sun smiles upon. I pray thee, then, go quickly, and return not.... For I am weak, yet would I fend thee from hurt."

How could I leave her thus, besieged by fantastic fears and foolish fancies? I did but hold her closer, and for a little while she lay very still. My thought was she had fainted, and I would have lain her down and fetched water from the pool. Divining my intent, she opened dew-dimmed eyes.

"Nay, for a moment stay," she softly breathed. "This moment I would cherish."

Caressing hands drew down my head to hers.

"Listen thou, my Chief, so that thou walkest not in darkness, to curse my name," at length she said, firm-voiced. "Since I was but a child I have looked for thee, for thy coming truly was foretold. Through Zeete it was declared thou wouldst come to me, even as thou didst come. Long hast thou filled my dreams, yet often have I doubted that I should really look into thine eyes and feel thine arms about me, even as now they are.... Ah, Thou—Thou indeed didst come!

"I did forswear my duty and break the Law, thereby begetting grief and suffering. The wisdom of those commanding Light and Life, rightly to punish me, now saith that, most of all to thee, I shall be a scourge—a thorn to pierce even to thy soul. My flesh is turned to ashes and my heart to ice. Rather than that I will defy the gods, do with me as they may!"

Sombre exaltation was in her voice, as that of a youthful martyr advancing bravely-proud to sacrificial altar. Foreboding, shapeless and lacking reason, weighed heavily upon me. I could not speak, but held her more closely to me, whereat she smiled—a wan, sweet smile that I may not forget.

"Nay, tempt me not otherwise," she pleaded bravely, "for there is indeed no other way beside. Through me thou wouldst suffer overmuch, thou who hast wrought no ill.... Not Flower is my name, say rather Grief. The spirits have told of me as one born to great power, vast treasure, and strange knowledge. For such what desire have I, if the trail thereto leads thee into the deeps?"

I know not what subtle necromancy benumbed my will and took from me my reason as she spoke, but inky clouds seemed to blot out the sky. The clean air swiftly changed to poisonous vapour. Singing of birds became the hiss of serpents. Intangible horrors possessed the honest earth. In that black hour it was borne in upon me that there could be no escape. Kismet, or Fate, or the inexorable Law—we tread perforce the path marked out for us! Clairvoyant vision in that timeless instant seemed given me to pierce the mystic veil and show for fact inevitable that there is no evading what is from the beginning ordained. Omnipotent forces control the circling spheres, and in the Great Scheme of all things She and I must, willy-nilly, play out our allotted parts—this mountain maid of mystery and I (a simple soldier of fortune, possessing none) were meant from Time's beginning to fuse our lives, sharing the bitter-sweet of mutual love and faith, passing through shadow-lands to what end I could not see. Vague terrors clutched, nor could I think of aught but that I must hold her close, shielding and comforting her.

"And what of me?" I questioned, when that dread moment had passed. "Was nothing said of me by your ill-omened prophets?"

"Are we but puppets, then, of the spirit kings?" she whispered, clinging tremulous, seeking the transient boon of empty contradiction.

"Of such things I know little," I answered shortly. "But this I do know: the fates, or gods, or Providence, as you will, have not without some purpose and some plan brought us two here together of all the countless peoples of the world. Henceforth our paths are one, whithersoever it leads or how rough the way!"

Long we sat then, heart reaching out to heart.... It was Zeete's voice, shrill with anxiety, that brought us back to earth and earth's concerns. She was below us on that faint, thin trail leading down to the painted gallery and that vast chamber of the luminous light. Remembrance of the Zulu envoys reproached me.... My Maisie's lips met mine in one long kiss.

"Until to-morrow," I whispered, and left her there. An upward glance showed her leaning over the rocky ledge to see me safe, as I went down the reim. In her sweet face was shadowed dread of dire things to be. Yet also it mirrored love and a great content.

CHAPTER V

STORMCLOUDS GATHER

Descending the cliffside trail, I marked with growing wonder the many lone baboons, all curiously silent, that peered down at us from the rocks and trees. Always before I had supposed them to go in troops. Of their strange watchful stillness I was minded to speak; and, seeming to read my thought, Zeete instantly answered it.

"They are my eyes and faithful servants," she said, as though thus to make use of the monkey-people were naught extraordinary. The matter of that kaffir babe came back to me, with Gentil's talk of the bushfolk, understanding the baboon speech. Again the witch forestalled a question I would have asked.

"The child was harmed not, nor would it have been. The Baas had indeed no cause to seek me out, for so soon as the brat was brought we sent it back. To slay the poor beast was wantonly wicked, yet at that I marvel not. He does not know; therefore he hates them all."

"You spoke of them as servants," I ventured. "Can you, then, truly train them to such purpose?"

Did that shrivelled hag possess a sense of caustic humour? Her dim eyes twinkled.

"Nay, surely none save the all-wise white lords could work such marvels," she answered lightly. "We Little People but ask them to do a thing, and it seems they do it."

"Ask them?" I echoed, bewildered.

She halted and gave a peculiar, barking call. Forthwith a great dog baboon dropped lightly from his perch on the high rocks and hurried to her side, his little brute eyes questioning. Again she spoke, or made, rather, certain strange grunting sounds, for it was no human speech. The beast went leaping away, soon lost to sight on the falling trail.

"We should learn how the captives fare," she stated blandly. "Nano will return to tell."

I could but stare, incredulous and dumb. Yet soon the baboon was back, to snarl out a tangle of throaty gutturals and fall in behind us like a disciplined dog.

"Our men have long since wakened," Zeete said unconcernedly, turning to me as though interpreting, "but their bonds are fast. Nor would it matter had they cast them off, save that in such case they would no more work mischief."

Confounded and groping for some key to the truth of things seeming indeed black magic, or that else were arrant nonsense, I feigned not to have heard. Yet the baboon had returned and there had seemed some obvious method in their exchange of wordless gibberish.

"Do baboons, then, act as your guards as well as runners?" at length I asked, feeling myself a fool.

"Nay, they could not be so trusted," she made reply. "The wardens of our caves have less to say, yet are they of more fixed mind. Wait, though, and see, for thou wouldst not believe."

As to the prisoners she would tell but little. The one, I gathered, was much trusted of Bambata, a warrior and a counsellor of parts. The other was that *induna* I had seen at the stead. I wondered at his being mixed in this Zulu business.

"He is a snake of quite another stripe from this unquiet Bambata's man," Zeete volunteered, cackling as at some jest. Hate in her tone, she added:

"Dust he may throw in the eyes of his ageing master, but me he does not befool. That he would trick Sankaeli, committing him unwittingly to a chancy venture, concerns me not at all. But when he would cross my plans he had well beware."

Her meaning was far from clear, but something of it I later gathered—that, acting for his Chief, grown almost senile, this headman of his was over-deep in intrigue with Bambata's folk, pledging Sankaeliland support to their desperate cause, himself to reap rich reward should that cause prevail. His king meanwhile sought the White Witch, leaving all weighty matters to his scheming man.

"This dog we hold," Zeete declared with passion, "hath never seen my lady, yet hath he filled his old lord's head with tales of her rare beauty, painting her to him also as passing all others in wisdom of peace and war. For that, perchance, I am somewhat to blame.... We have to thank these Amaxosas' coward fears of the unseen ones that they have not long since found her."

My heart missed a beat at that; and as for the scheming counsellor of the king, I then and there determined it should be long ere he returned to Sankaeli's kraal to work further mischief. These birds she had limed for us seemed more than common game.

The hanging gallery when we were come to it was peopled with a great company of baboons that chattered overmuch till we were drawn close, when fell swift silence, though scores of beady eyes focussed upon us. At a harsh cry from the witch, the hairy brutes divided into two companies, one on either side, laying hold of a long rope of *tambookie*^[1] stretched out along the uneven rocky floor, as would two tug-of-war teams. And, as I stared, these settled themselves to pull, one against the other, or so it seemed, whereon a mimosa bush parted as on that other night of strange happenings, disclosing the well-hidden entrance to another ancient passageway, lacking the luminous walls.

[1] A rank South African grass sometimes growing to a length of fifteen feet.

"Whence came that strangely golden light?" I sought to know, as we groped forward in the half-darkness.

"Surely a white chief hath no need to ask his slave?" she chuckled.... "Nay, I meant not to vex. In time thou shalt surely know—and of much else."

She paused at a sudden twist of the rock-hewn hallway (or it more probably was one of their many natural tunnels), where a great upright slab appeared to mark the end. Its uneven surface her claw-like fingers explored, resting on what in the dull murk seemed but some chance discoloration of the stone. Regarding it more closely, I saw that it was an inset of some metal, ages old. Her hand on this, Zeete turned to me.

"Much art thou trusted," she gravely said. "Wilt thou not, then, trust Zeete a little, however lightly thou esteemeth her ways? In these great hills my people lived through countless years, in which, thinkest not, they may have grasped some knowledge. And this remember, that, trusting me, no hurt shall come to thee. Let naught alarm thee when we pass within. The guardians of this place be serpent folk. Pay them no heed, nor move with suddenness, and they will harm thee not.... I would not again willingly deal death to such as serve."

I bethought me then how quickly she had acted when the puff-adder menaced me, and how thereafter he had grieved her unwholesome pet.

"I'll try to keep my head," I told her shortly. She thanked me with a glance, as soundless the crude door of stone swung wide.

It was like passing into a dank and noisome crypt, a long-closed sepulchre of unnamable foul things. The air was stagnant with the taint of death, a faintly animal and musky scent, loathly and nauseating, breeding instinctive terror. The walls and floor told in their strange soapy smoothness of age-long contacts with sweating naked bodies. The way led inward on a slight incline, up which our feet felt their uncertain course through what suggested both dust and slime and yet was neither. I thought of that gruesome stairway Kipling compared to the track of a monstrous snail. Until one's eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, naught could be clearly seen; yet in a little time that mildewed gallery took shadowy form. It had doubtless in long past time been one of the many natural caverns of the country, improved by human hands. Ten feet or more in width it was between its leprous sidewalls, the roof even less in places—in others lost in black mystery of darkness. I thought the place all unlighted, yet as we worked slowly forward and passed a projecting buttress of sable stone, I discerned at the end a slender wisp of pallid light, making doubly dense the enveloping darkness. Some tiny crevice in the granitic roof, here of unguessable height, so faintly illumined the den that things therein, as sight attuned itself to the murk, took spectral shape, curtained by grey-black fog. My gaze went to the stygian ceiling, seeking to pierce its veil, when Zeete's touch recalled me to our grim business.

The cavern now resolved itself into a bare, rock-ribbed vault, perchance fifty feet long by twelve or more in width, and at the very end were two prone bodies that I at first mistook for dead men. And coiled by each, on either side, with upraised heads and hard, unwinking eyes, were huge black mambas,[2] silently watchful.

[2] One of the largest and most dangerous African snakes.

"Stand thou here very still and speak not," Zeete whispered. I nodded and she glided from my side to crouch and croon over each of those great snakes in turn. They slipped away instantly, to vanish into holes. Zeete then beckoned me, and I went on. The captives, upon their backs, stared rigidly up at us, but spoke not. One was a Zulu warrior, strong-faced and superbly muscled, a giant in middle age. Over him Zeete bent with uplifted knife. I sprang to seize her arm, thinking she meant to strike.

"Nay, he is safe," said she. "For see, here is one to whom Fear is stranger. They be a brave breed, these Bhagwan, though lacking wit."

The man had uttered no sound, even with the blade at his throat. Nor was there so much as a tremor of any muscle.

"This strong one's hands were the better for what hangs at thy belt," she breathed, her knife descending but to sever his bonds. He slowly lifted and flexed his arms, making as though to rise, with difficulty. His huge frame must have been cramped and numb. His eyes turning toward me hardened. I thought him about to spring upon me.

"No nonsense now," I told him, poking my revolver in his ribs. Whereupon he grinned, good-humouredly enough, and held out his hands for the cuffs. Zeete was stooping over Sankaeli's perfidious headman.

"This two-faced dog were better with the spirits," she hissed vindictively. "Give me leave to deal justice."

"No," I ordered sharply. "It is not for me or for you to say. All things must be according to the Law."

"Much trouble would be saved," she sighed, and shrugged, sheathing her eager knife. The man gasped his relief, whereat Bambata's warrior laughed wholehearted contempt for him.

"I obey," mumbled the pigmy doctress; "but my way were the shorter and more sure." She faced the Sankaeli man, now shakily getting to his feet, her voice rasping menace:

"Thou foul and mangy rat, well knowest thou no mercy is thy due! Justice is but put forward—remember that! For each and every thing is a time appointed, and for thee, faithless one, the day thou diest by this hand of mine. Leave but my lady from thy crooked schemes and that day may be long in dawning!"

He stared in superstitious panic, uncomprehending; and when her talon-like fingers touched him as she bound his arms, he trembled as with an ague. Thenceforward Bambata's messenger would have naught with him.

"Where are thy woman's trinkets?" he taunted. "Sankaeli's eyes grow dim not to read thy worthlessness." For the little witch-doctress, on the other hand, he showed ungrudged admiration.

"She hath a captain's wit," he declared, trotting at my stirrup an hour later when we had taken the road. "We did walk into her trap like two *tock-tockie*.^[3] ... That timorous thing that shames the kehla he wears (he would be a king, forsooth!) did boast his knowledge of a shorter way to his old master's kraal, which way we took, minded to save much time. He told me not that it lay through the land of the Little People, else I should have made gifts to the spirit ones and sought leave to pass.

[3] A slow-moving African beetle incapable of flight, named for its habit of tapping its abdomen on the ground.

"All went aright till we were come to a darkly-deep *donga*^[4] over which was laid a frail bridge of trees fastened with creepers as in olden time. This broke when we were upon it and, falling with it, we were netted like two rabbits, which would indeed have shown more sense than we. As we there struggled to free ourselves, the baboons swarmed about us and the air grew heavy, so that we slept.... We wakened in darkness, fast bound in a dreary place, and perforce lay still. Thou sawest we had such company as may not be trifled with?"

[4] Dry watercourse or gulch, steep-banked.

There had been a great company of baboons about the steep-banked gulch into which they fell. I spoke to the Zulu of

the part these creatures appeared to play as Zeete's messengers, but he showed no surprise. It was, I gathered, the common tale of that countryside that the Bushman dwarfs were thus served.

As to his mission, being of Chaka's strain, he would of course say nothing, disdainfully silencing hints of possible leniency or reward—laughing at threats of prison or the rope. I felt myself shamed in seeking to gain his secrets when he looked up, his martial face stern with anger.

"One fears not to be burned who plays with fire," he reminded me. "But to ask such as I to tattle of his king's business were scurvy talk while I be bound with irons!"

Nor could they get more from him at Headquarters, where I delivered the pair.

"My life is in thy hands, my honour in my own," the Zulu told them proudly, nor would he answer more.

Sankaeli's *induna* was of a different breed, and, had I not remembered Zeete's words, I, too, should have swallowed the glib tale he told. In this he pictured himself one grossly deceived, and from him we gleaned much of Bambata's plans that fitted in usefully. As he accused Bambata's envoy of having come unbidden into Sankaeliland to foment a general war upon all whites, which charge the big Zulu would not deign deny, we passed on the fighting man to higher hands. When last I heard of him he was still in prison, maintaining his stern silence. The other I saw soundly flogged and remanded in custody, pending some further inquiry. That we had but begun when he contrived escape. He was a wily fellow and ready-tongued. Even I wondered at times if Zeete, vastly prejudiced, had not misjudged him. I was on other duty when he slipped through our fingers, and did not hear that news till a week had passed. By then Bambata had the whole countryside in turmoil and, all but sleeping in saddle, I gave the matter small thought. When at length I contrived to revisit the stead Gentil was not about and his people dumb. They would not even say where the Baas had gone.

Long hours I spent as well at the trysting pool, anxious and barren hours. For none came near save chattering baboons—neither the laughing White Witch of that hanging fairyland nor even little Zeete.

* * * * *

It was in the third week after Zeete's capture of the Zulu envoy and Sankaeli's *schelm* of a headman (for which, of course, I, not the little witch-doctress, got full credit) that we had the hailstorm, and in those weeks I'd no chance whatever to do anything on my own and not a whisper came from the stead or the girl of my dreams. In saddle day and night, sleep grown almost a total stranger, worked to a frazzle on patrol and convoy duty, not knowing from hour to hour if we'd be wiped out, and too fagged much to care, I did my work automatically and set myself against worrying. It can't be done, you know; but they always tell you not to worry, and I tried not to. If I'd let myself think I'd have been no use to anyone, and I knew it.

I'd been riding herd on a string of prisoners for Pretoria as far as our district boundary and got back to the Post all in. So dog-tired I couldn't eat—just heaved myself down on my cot, dead to the world; didn't even pull off my boots. Haven't an idea how long I slept, but it must have been hours. Darkness was closing in when I'd made the Post, a darkness you could almost reach out and touch it was that thick and tangible. And utter stillness everywhere: not a breath of air to set the tree-tops curtsying; not the twitter of a bird or a rustle in the tall reeds or grasses. Uncannily calm and oppressive, as if all Nature was in suspense, getting ready for doings of some sort.

I'd have known we were in for something if I'd been myself, but fifty-four hours in saddle and a tricky lot of blacks to look after, so that I had to keep my eyes skinned every minute, and I wasn't paying much attention to weather signs when the job was over and I could let down a bit. Bed was all I had in mind—bed and the hope that just for once I could have my sleep through without someone rooting me out to go chasing after more trouble.

They told me afterwards I hadn't turned in half an hour when the storm first broke with the roar of a major battle, lashing down the valley with the hail behind it. It flattened two of our huts much as artillery fire might have, and pounded the corporal's dog to a pulp when he tried to make a dash of it from the messroom. And I slept through it all, while the hammer of old Thor boomed and thundered and the mountains chorused back the din—perversely to come suddenly wide

awake with a sudden lull in the hurricane and a short-lived silence everywhere like that of the late afternoon, before the rain and hail began pounding down again on the tin roof of the Post.

My eyes had opened just in time to see our big paraffin lamp gyrating and guttering wildly as the door opened a mere crack, only enough for a lean black hand to show as it dropped something on the floor. The door closed as I sprang up, and the deluge was on when I dashed out to grab the visitor. Whoever the hand belonged to had been swallowed up in the gloom, and the storm broke anew so quickly I had no easy thing of it winning back inside, drenched to the skin, and the corporal had to turn out, grumbling, and help me close the door. The lamp had blown out. We got it in commission again and looked about. It was the corporal spotted it first, on the floor, catching the light of the lamp—a sharp little assegai, and close by it a broken string of bluish beads. When we examined them closer we saw the sinew they'd been threaded on was slashed and dyed with blood!

I didn't need to see more, and I didn't have any ears then for orders—the corporal shouting at me to wait till morning and blistering me for having gone daft. It was mutiny all right, but She needed me and all hell couldn't hold me back. He about guessed it, too, for he gave up talking as I snatched my things—even offered to trek along with me, though he knew he couldn't. He wasn't a half bad sort, underneath the skin.

Outside the tempest raged when day should have broken. A cold, driving mist blotted out the veldt. The wind rose shrieking, higher and yet higher, while I saddled up, driving the damp cold in to the very marrow. The gusty squalls grew stronger as I mounted, almost hurling me from the saddle, so that for once I had to cling to Jean as I flung myself along her neck. Through the mists came the rain in great stinging drops warm as blood. There was no seeing ten yards in the swirling fury, but I gripped the mare with my knees and she plunged forth gallantly. Almost I think she knew.

We'd scarce made half a mile when the first thunder-clap of the new storm split overhead and lost itself in endless rumblings in the hills and kloofs. It's only out there on the roof of the world that storms work their full battalions. Only there come all together the mists and the tearing winds, the rain, the thunder, the vicious lightning and the hail—the terrible African hail!

We'd been out from the Post perhaps an hour when it caught us, and had made less than two miles. Lucky for us at that, for there was thereabouts a hut, abandoned but fairly tight, that offered shelter. Made it in the nick of time; my slicker was pretty well riddled on the weather side and my arm and face felt as though they'd been the mark for a shotgun fusillade. The mare'd got it 'most as bad. Her neck and side dripped blood as she crowded into the hut after me, all atremble. Not a minute too soon we were making it, for hardly were we under cover when a blue flame of lightning ripped the heavens, and there followed such a crash it seemed the world must have burst asunder and the air was thick with the stink of brimstone.

A dozen bolts must have struck within a very short radius and, looking out, I saw six or seven hares killed and hammered flat on the steaming earth by the hail as they scurried in quest of safety.

Then came its weird and terrifying roll as it drove and tore at our ancient roof—dull, uniform, smashing, furious, overwhelming—countless machine-guns with inexhaustible belts concentrated on the time-thinned thatch! To look from the doorway was but to gaze at a shimmering sheet of steel....

And then, suddenly, cessation—peace and an astounding silence! The sun shone. The wind died abruptly and the mists rolled slowly by, bits of gossamer melting into the clean, pure air. Miles away the fearsome column of the thundering hail charged on.

We took the road again in a transformed world. The beautiful turf, so green but an hour since, was battered bare, and seemed, far as eye could reach, sown with dazzling diamonds where the jagged ice-stones caught the sunlight on their many facets and threw it back in one fierce, flashing, blinding glare. The path bore scant resemblance to that we knew, and everywhere was mute evidence of the terror that had ridden the vanished wind: here, a snake grotesquely contorted, crushed and torn; there, a tortoise broken and hammered through the futile armour of its shell; partridge and parrakeet riddled as though by batteries of shotguns at a scant dozen paces; the reddish-brown of a young buck stretched across the trail, its large eyes glazed, blood-froth on lips and muzzle. Jean snorted as she overleaped it.

My eyes subconsciously photographed the far-flung stormwrack where Death had glutted. My mind was ahead, with Her. What peril menaced her? How came her summons to me? How and where should I seek her? What of watchful Zeete, that she had failed her mistress?

Chin sunk in the sodden collar of my steaming tunic, I cudgelled my brains for some theory of what had gone amiss—tried to work out some plan of action, the while giving Jean her head and pushing her cruelly. Thus it was that we came ere noon to that great rock from which the secret trail winds upward to the pool of the hidden kloof, and the mare fell into an easy walk as though waiting orders. I roused myself to swing her to the mountain path, and at the moment a snakelike loop of reim dropped from a ledge above, pinioning both my arms, and I was jerked from the saddle.

I heard an exultant shout, and glimpsed overhead the evil face of Sankaeli's treacherous man, whom last I had seen mouthing his threats of vengeance as he stumbled from the whipping-post.

CHAPTER VI

WHITE MAGNET-STONE MAGIC

If ever a human being belied his creation in God's image it was that knavish vizier of old Sankaeli. His gashed and furrowed face was twisted in a fiendish grimace; his beady eyes glared baleful triumph as he leered down at me, pinioned and in his power—at his mercy I'd almost said; mercy was utterly alien to his savage soul. Relieved of my weight in the saddle, Jean had bounded away with an affrighted snort. I could hear her hoof-beats in diminished cadence as she stormed up the ancient by-path. And then, pressing close on either side of the kehla-crowned slave of cunning, appeared two gorilla-like Chinese, mine-escapees by their garb, hatefully gleeful as he.

I strained impotently at my bonds, whereupon the three of them, chuckling raucously, hauled at the reim, binding my arms the tighter, till I was drawn full ten feet clear of the sodden earth. Either the leathern line slipped or there was sinister purpose in the play—of a sudden it gave and down I crashed, striking my head. My senses swam and I knew nothing more until, awakening as from a nightmare, stiff in every bone and joint, a cruel composite of aches and pains, I found myself stretched on my back in a sylvan glade, the blistering sun streaming down through tapering trees to scorch my face, and swarms of diminutive flies invading my mouth and eyes.

My arms I could not move; fast bound they were with green hide. My feet, I soon discovered, also were lashed together. With torturing effort I could but raise my head scant inches and mark the scoundrel trio as they squatted a few yards distant, deep in council.

Where I was or how long I had lain there were equally past conjecture. The leafage told me it was some way off and above the path, while no whisper of the gurgling spruit came to aid location. My temples throbbed and pounded, sticky with clotting blood. Dizziness and nausea raked me, yet somehow I managed to pull myself together and let out no whimper. By tightly closing and rapidly winking my eyes I scattered the clustering flies so that, through slitted lids, I could take stock of my villainous captors, still in confab.

That they had dared such a trick, and I in the Police, showed how desperate they were and how slim chances were for me. Their lives were forfeit, as well they knew. I was doomed to die. To escape torture was my best hope. Cold wrath possessed me, banishing physical ills. It seemed, indeed, to give me flooding strength—put heart in me for anything. I raged for revenge, but to win it I must first escape. And how was that possible? I dared not think of my interrupted mission or I should have, indeed, gone mad; and never had I stood so in need of all my poor wits.

By straining at my bonds I soon found there was no loosing them, although by twisting my wrists I painfully purchased slight slippage with the left. The Sankaeli man glanced casually toward me and I had sense enough to feign unconsciousness. When I again ventured to peep, he still squatted there, quite alone. His coolie chums had vanished, doubtless in quest of the mare.

And right there, for all my troubles, I was able to fetch a grin. I knew what a lively reception she would give them if they came within reach of her teeth or heels. More power to her! At the same time I hoped they'd not find her. If only she had returned to that storm-swept track and would make her way back to the Post, aid might come not too late. But of all forlorn hopes I knew this was an outside chance. The mare would more likely graze and wait for me. No, I couldn't count on her.

The Sankaeli got up. I could feel him coming near, though he moved stealthily. I held myself immobile, scarce daring to breathe. The vexing flies returned. My nose told me he was bending over me. For ages it seemed I waited to feel his blade. Instead, a hand plucked my knife from its sheath, then fumbled at my watch-pocket and I felt my treasured timepiece leaving me—and heard at the self-same instant, close at hand, the snapping of a twig. The ringed rascal leaped away just as one of the cut-throat coolies slipped out of the bordering bush. I hazarded a look and hope returned.

Kaffir and Chinese fronted one another, murderously still, not six feet from where I lay. My watch slipped from the black man's fingers as his hand sought the knife. Then the other sprang, talon-like fingers clutching for his opponent's throat. A bony knee found the groin and the knife tinkled to the ground, nor dared he stoop to pick it up, much as it meant to him. It was from then a soundless struggle save for their laboured breathing, the impact of punishing hands and slither of naked feet as they wove forth and back, clutching, tugging, straining—fists, feet, and teeth vindictively at work.... The coolie had come back but just in time to see the lifting of my ticker. There's really no honour among thieves, praise be, and that makes most rows among rogues.

So busy were they battling on the sudden flaming up of Asian passion that I was quite forgotten, and, sensing this, I threw caution overboard and twisted and tugged desperately at my wrist until at last I had freed the hand, so numb, though, as to be almost useless.... Still they fought furiously, the kaffir like a cornered rat, desperately frantic, knowing he fought for life—the Chinaman gone amok, a frothing yellow horror. I had snatched hasty glances while I worked at the loosened reim, wondering what precious seconds I might gain before one or the other caught me at it and finished me off. I looked again, weighing the chances of freeing my other hand without bringing them down on me. They were rolling about, tight-locked and grunting heavily, for all the world like a couple of ferocious pit dogs, worrying and tearing at one another, alike eager to make the kill. Cautiously I turned on my side, the better to get at my prisoned hand....

And then came the miracle!

It looked a thin splinter of silver in the trodden grass—very like a little fish. With a thrill I knew it for my knife. Could I but reach it! I put my life on the hazard as I inched nearer, half-rolling, half-snaking myself along. It was only a few feet from me! And then an obtrusive root, a stubborn twig, or something of the sort, malevolently caught and held me! Wriggle and tug and twist, I could not win free. So near and yet so far! I stifled a groan of despair.... The two still fought, gaspingly intent.... My eyes found the knife again....

Had I indeed gone stark mad? It surely seemed nearer! And, stranger still, I could have sworn it moved! Almost imperceptibly, yet unmistakably, it moved—and directly toward me! Oblivious to all else, forgetting even my imminent peril, I stared dumbfounded.... Magically it came closer—more and more quickly, too! It was but a foot away! Then it seemed to leap of its own volition at my pounding heart! My senses swam. I knew myself for a fool, but with my free hand I felt for it and my cramped fingers closed on sun-hot steel—found the gut-wound haft. The blade clung tenaciously to me! And then the riddle was read:

The magnet-stone in my pocket had served me well!

They hadn't gone through me, then! Probably hadn't had time. And if they'd but guessed it, there was treasure for the taking in that bit of quartz beside which, from the native angle, all the gold in Africa was as nothing! Not that I knew it then, or would have thought of it had I known. I wasn't yet out of the wood, not by any means. Even when I'd cut my bonds I could scarcely stand; and when I managed to get on my feet things seemed to whirl around me. Pretty wobbly and stiff; no bones broken, though.

I got a fresh grip on myself and faced the situation. If only I could turn the tables on that precious pair I wouldn't call the King my uncle. Yes, but how was it to be done? My hand dropped to my holster—empty, of course! Those brutes still worrying each other had fight enough left in them yet, and the third might pop back any second. No, the odds were all

against me. My play right then was a quick and quiet get-away. Revenge would have to wait. I hated like sin to turn tail, but common sense told me to. I edged toward the bush, and had almost made it when they were up and after me with a rush, their own scrap abandoned. I had only the knife. Didn't seem to be much show for me, but my blood was up. Back to a tree, I waited. At any rate, I'd give them a fight.

The coolie seemed the more dangerous of the two. He came on like a charging bull, throwing caution to the winds. The black blighter wasn't so keen. He'd more likely try to work round and heave an assegai through my back, I thought. I'd have to keep my eyes peeled for him. But right then I had my hands full. The Chinaman had me overweighted and he fought like a wildcat; all over me at once he was, and though I slashed and stabbed, getting home, too, it didn't seem to deter him. If he'd had any sort of a weapon I'd not have had a chance. Strangling seemed his long suit—that and the knee to the body. The first time he drove it into me I thought I was done for surely. Somehow, though, I carried on, and barely managed to break a neck-hold that would have finished me in short order. Got my knife home again, too, half-way up to the hilt in his side. It staggered him and I'd a chance to catch my breath. Out of the tail of my eye I caught sight of the kaffir, working in with an assegai balanced for a throw.

How I did it I couldn't say, but I spun that coolie round and he got what was meant for me and went down and out, bringing me to earth with him, his yellow arms locked round me. "So this ends it," I thought, for I couldn't break free. And ended it would have been but for a second miracle. The black was running toward me, when he seemed to catch himself in mid-stride and freeze, statue-still, listening. Then, with a shriek of terror, he turned and dived into the brush; and after him in a bunch plunged four great dog baboons. I could hear their harsh barking as they gave chase.... The fight was over. I was free and alone, I didn't know where, with a dead Chinaman at my feet.

The kaffir had dropped his assegai in his sudden panic, and I picked it up, my watch, too, and started out to get my bearings. It wasn't so easy, and the day was almost gone. Half a dozen tracks led from the mimic battlefield, buck spoor most of them, but none seemed to go anywhere. I was fairly bushed and night was falling. Stiff and sore and sulky, I realized that at any minute Sankaeli's man or that second coolie I'd seen with him might sneak up and get me from cover. I'd no notion which way to turn. A little depression in one of the rocks held a few cupfuls of stagnant water, and I risked drinking a mouthful and swabbed my face. Felt better for that and sat down to try to think things out. Didn't dare risk a fire, much as I would have liked to. Must have sat shivering there half an hour or so, and it had grown so dark you couldn't see your hand before your face, when I fancied I heard a voice. I listened, and it came again faintly, not much more than a whisper, and from where I couldn't say:

"Baas Ralph!"

It was little Zeete.

I was up like a flash and hailed her back, peering this way and that into the inky gloom, but as good as blind. Next minute she was with me; must have had eyes like a cat. Never thought I'd be so glad to see her, but I certainly was. How she'd found me I couldn't imagine. It would have stumped the best of our black trackers. The mare, she told me, had come riderless up the secret trail, and she'd started right off to locate me. Had mischance befallen me? And through whom? Meisje? Why, no harm had touched her—as yet, although dangers threatened. Of that we would palaver later. The Princess had not sent for me. Her assegai had vanished between two suns, also a string of beads.... That headman had craftily worked a fine trick on me!

But was I of a surety unharmed? I told her shortly of the fight and the coolie that would raid no more—also of the kaffir whom the baboons had so strangely pursued. That seemed somehow to please her greatly, and nothing would do but for her to make a light and smear my head with certain evil-smelling medicaments from her witch's pouch. Food also had she, and a tonic drink. I felt a new man when she had finished fussing over me, and was more than ready to march when she gave the word. Can't lose 'em in the dark, those hill folk. Instinct, I suppose. Jean, she said, was hobbled and waiting at no great distance, and so we found her, the beldame leading confidently through the bush whilst I blundered along behind, a hand clutching at her kaross. She would have it then that I ride while she led the mare; and thus at length we came, as a thin crescent moon peeped over a shoulder of the great hills, to the yawning mouth of a cavern at the rude trail's end.

"Home!" she said, in English, to my amazement.

The mouth of the witch's abode gave upon a level and rocky shelf, by day commanding a far-flung prospect of verdant foothills and unscarred valley. Etched in black and silver by a shy young moon, the portal loomed a dark and forbidding void, full twenty feet overhead, half curtained by flowering creepers. A more fit den for beasts than human habitation it appeared, fiery eyes staring fixedly from the shadows—a numerous company of baboons by the tainted air, all curiously still. These noiselessly gave way at our approach, save one huge hairy brute that leaped suddenly out of nowhere, to bark harshly and, at a sharp command, regain invisibility.

"This be our outer gate," the sorceress croaked up at me, parting the tangled leafage with her staff. "Beyond none trespass, for my servants watch. Thou sawest Sankaeli's man as he ran from them?" She chuckled impishly. "I warrant he fled not far." Speech halted there abruptly. Shortly she added gravely:

"Thou sawest also those two of the yellow aliens lately come hither amongst our blacks? Then we must watch, for fear of the spirits they know not as do these Amaxosas. Hence make we here no light. The way is easy. Follow upon my heels."

Feeling each step with care, for I had no mind to set foot on some lurking snake, straightway we marched into the mountain's heart. And yet the air was pure and the going dry and uncumbered. A long, long way it seemed, walking, as I did, blindly, but presently we came to a lofty place, less dim and spectral far, shut in by hills, where a faint breeze stirred and overhead the star-gemmed heavens gleamed. Here rocky walls rose aslant, enfolding an amphitheatre of many acres, huge blocks of stone (that later I knew for altars), therein appearing in regulated order, much like a druidical circle, fencing an awesome pit whence rose a thin spiral of sulphurous vapour.

"Here the earth gods wrought justice in time long past," whispered my pigmy guide. "Night wanes. We linger not. Hither we may come again. The courts of the dead wait well."

Pressed we then on, hugging the rocky wall. The trail gave at length on an ample passage plainly of human fashioning, for shaped boulders were set one upon another to support crude beams forming a colossal gateway. Through this we went and on in unbroken silence until, the end of the dim corridor being gained, little Zeete halted. I heard her fumbling at an unseen door. This opened presently, a stone slab broad and high as a cathedral's portal, yet so exactly balanced a mere touch swung it when one had learned the trick.

At once my eyes were stunned by that same flooding light that first astounded me when Zeete brought me through the painted gallery to that grim audience chamber of a forgotten race. Here, though, it was more diffused, less dazzlingly radiant; and when my eyes had somewhat accustomed themselves, it irked them not at all.

The walls here likewise were incised and painted in hues intensely vivid, as though fresh from the brush. On the left, the several long limed scenes bore almost a domestic touch. Here a group of diminutive maidens, greenish-grey, like none on earth to-day, gathered eagerly intent about a wrinkled crone while she fashioned what bore some semblance to a grotesque doll; there, laughing, exuberant boys, suggestively reptilian none the less, at practice with tiny blow-guns, their mark an upright wand, two gnarled and grizzled elders watching indulgently—guards, or perchance instructors.

Quite filling the opposite wall was a widely different study. It may well have been a pictorial record of some spectacular triumph of a long past time. A serene, scant-bearded figure in iridescent robes, his eyes and high forehead veiled, sat throned augustly. Kingly authority was in his mien, although he was, as also all about him, of but childish stature—councillors, men-at-arms, musicians and magicians, the latter in closest attendance on the exalted one. Below the daïs deployed a long procession of gigantic blacks in ignominious bonds—Ethiopian, Hottentot, and yet others of markedly Egyptian and Abyssinian cast—doing homage to this puny monarch of days when the world was young. Slaves massed great store of tribute at the royal feet. No women were in the multitudinous company, and but one child, a sumptuously clad, doll-like figure proudly erect beside the throne, doubtless the princely heir.

Nor was there among those many score of incised and painted figures that of any beast or bird, either ebony blackness forming the back and canopy of the seat of state. Half serpent it was, the cruel head that of the Assames hamadryad rather than our own dread mamba, to which it is closely akin—the body a typical lagavaan, doubtless of the

Silurian age. I myself have seen modern survivors of this amphibian lizard stretching seven feet, even more.

Further I cannot speak of these weird paintings, uncannily realistic by being in bas-relief and thereby gaining almost a new dimension. We hurried on, passing through a much smaller doorway of faintly fragrant wood into a palace chamber gorgeously fitted. A double row of stately vermilion columns supported the lofty roof, dome-shaped and opalescent white, as were the encircling walls, with coral panellings. No footfall sounded, for strewn about the onyx floor were many rugs of lion, leopard, black panther, and other wilderness beasts, all beautifully dressed, caressing to the touch.

Inviting couches extended along the walls, heaped with yet other rugs of furs softer and finer still and closely woven stuffs of silken sheen and texture. Seductive cushions and low ebony tables were scattered about, the polished tops of some a rich mosaic of creamy ivory and uncut gems; and at the farther end, framed in dull, beaten gold, was set an oval mirror of flawless polished metal that verified and repeated the palatial splendour.

"Kings here have rested," said Zeete quietly, as I stared, dumb with amaze. "Rest thou here likewise. I go to have food prepared. Later we talk together. The time has come, for one we love is hedged about by dangers.... Nay, ask not more as yet. Power is gained by knowledge, which oft must its priceless self be bought with patience"—for I had found my tongue and questions crowded. "She for the present is safe, else we should not be here. Shortly she cometh hither. Let that suffice."

I found myself alone. A portière of peacock feathers still aflutter betokened the hidden door through which she had passed. Sinking upon a couch, I vainly sought to marshal my wandering wits. Of a truth I was over-weary, but sleep was of all things then furthest from my thought.... She had said the Princess would come—here to this royal place of history long entombed! How suited it was to her in her barbaric beauty! She was coming, to me! Believing, I forced content. My little witch-doctress, too, had promised plain speech at last. Some ray of honest reason must then pierce the fog of thickening mysteries? Till then, why blunder blindly? ... Languor stole over me and I must have dozed....

Again Zeete stood before me. One of the tiny tables had been moved conveniently near, holding wholesome food. There, too, was my lost revolver! How she had come by it she would not say.

"Thine hurts must first be mended," she insisted gently, "for to serve Her thou wilt need strength, both of body and mind." Forthwith she fell to bandaging my sore head with certain bruised and aromatic leaves and pungent ointments that brought grateful ease. I managed to swallow some *biltong*^[1] and drank deeply as bidden of a bitter draught she poured from an antique flagon; then slept again dreamlessly.

[1] Meat cut in strips and dried.

Awakening much refreshed, my head no more a torment and my strength renewed, I found on the tabouret where my meal had been a curious array of small useless trifles such as fond mothers cherish, to whom, indeed, they are beyond all price: a baby's much-worn shoe, a close-clinging curl of golden hair, a once-blue ribbon, a scrap of lace that had been a lady's kerchief, a battered doll crudely carved from a mealie cob, a wedding-ring worn paper-thin, and with these an age-yellowed letter that to me told nothing, for the uncertain lines in angular, wavering script were become so faded as to have all but vanished—and they were in a foreign tongue.

Puzzle on it as I might, I could make nothing of it. Reluctantly I put it by, to pick up one by one, with gentling new emotions, those inconsequential souvenirs of care-free childhood. How they took one back along the trail of years—summoned memories to mist the eyes! A girl-child's toys, somehow I felt that could they but speak it would be of Her.... That silken curl twined itself round my heart....

The letter must hold the clue? Back to it I went; lucklessly it had for me no more meaning than those fantastic symbols in the painted gallery. The more I sought to wrest their message from the pallid lines, the more futile the task appeared. Vexation seized me. The secret would have to wait for someone more learned than I to read it from that

baffling scrawl.... Plainly a woman's hand, written many years—but by whom, and for whose eyes? Back in a tantalizing circle, no nearer the heart of the elusive problem! Wait perforce I must, but where could one be found to answer my riddle in that harried country-side of plain farmer-folk knowing little but their toil, their stock and ever-threatening death by hostile blacks?

That letter persisted—insisted. Where had I seen such writing, those same curious symbols, before? Neither Dutch nor English, as certainly not French or Spanish, the unfamiliar characters wholly unlike the German. They had more the look of Greek or Russian. Russian? Laggard memory answered the spur, and I cursed myself for a dull-witted fool, it all came back so clearly. That book-lined living-room at the farmstead in the hidden kloof—pencilled marginal notes in the Lydekker manual!

No shadow of doubt lingered. Gentil, the man of solitude, right at hand! Not another such scholar in the whole broad veldt country! Why hadn't I at once thought of him? Gentil, the recluse, the scientist, hapless victim of my Golden Girl's flaming anger, so strangely shaken at sight of her and who so earnestly had sought to shield her! Even denying her existence at risk of Sankaeli's ill-will! She, too, with her amazing talk of having known him only in girlish dreams! More than chance coincidence here! The mystery of my mountain maid must be some way involved with his!

What was it he had said at parting: "Many things perplex of which I may not speak." Two challenging enigmas promised to merge; to both Gentil seemingly held the key. The stead was near. Zeete must show the way. I called, and she straightway came, her age-weary eyes fixing instantly on the letter in my hand.

"Here am I," she answered, low-voiced. "Thou hast read the word from the Halls of Silence? Did I then well or ill?"

As she spoke she faced me, erect, composed, a dignified if quaintly pathetic figure. But the bony finger that pointed to the yellowed screed was all atremble. Thus she stood waiting judgment, on what indictment I could not guess. If only I could read that letter!

Stumbling for words, I confessed my ignorance of writings in other languages than my own. She heard me out in silence. Then of a sudden her rigid pose fell from her and, choking and sobbing, she crumpled at my feet, a frail and aged woman, no more the resourceful wonder-worker in whose supposed occult powers even I felt a dawning faith. Something akin to panic robbed her of her wit and courage. Long minutes passed ere she unsteadily gained her feet and tottered toward a second close-curtained doorway, signing to me to follow.

The inner chamber upon which this gave was small and bare as any austere monk's cell, save that its upper end was completely filled by a sculptured figure, grotesque and hideous. Semblance of man it bore. The enormous head indisputably was human, with cavernous, compelling eyes glowing blackly luminous, and a hawk-like nose, or rather beak. Also arms and hands were man-like, the one resting lightly upon the knee, the other (outstretched) holding a baton, the end of which gleamed redly. For this that tiny wand of the witch-doctress might have served as model.

True, too, the sculptor had garbed the forbidding figure in rainbow brilliant robes, richly bejewelled, save that thrown loosely over the shoulder was a light fur kaross that had a somewhat familiar look. I presently recognized it as fashioned of a pelt much larger but marbled even as the moocha of the golden maid. The flesh tints of the figure were greenish-white, suggestive of the belly of a snake; there was, indeed, something horridly reptilian about the entire fearsome thing that, stranger as I was to nerves, affected me oddly. The feet were very simian, and the rope-like hair curled atop the misshapen head resolved itself into a serpent.

I looked to see her prostrate herself before the carven monstrosity, but this she did not. Instead, with uplifted hand, she began a solemn chant—an invocation of some sort, I had no doubt, though the spoken words to me were void of meaning, melodiously liquid and widely different from any common African speech. So reverential was her mien that of mere decency I stood with uncovered head, awaiting what next might be. She thanked me with a look as, speaking no word, she led back to the adjoining chamber so curiously in contrast with that vault-like shrine. There, waving me to a couch, she squatted by my side, laying out, one by one, those childish trinkets—and with them the yellowed letter.

CHAPTER VII

MESSAGES FROM THE PAST

"By the spirits of my fathers, I speak truth and naught else," quoth she. "My oath by the gods is taken, thyself witness. Hear, then, and question not."

She paused as if in thought, then went on in measured phrases, her voice gaining strength and timbre, tired eyes kindling:

"An over-long trail it is I follow back and I would save needless speech. Be patient, then, and hearken.... I am indeed almost the very last of a once mighty people, favoured of the high gods. Before the Etruscans were we—before Hyksos, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian. Cultured Greece and mighty Rome were thousands of years unborn, to wax and wane. Egypt had yet to rise from the nourishing Nile, her Pharaohs rearing mimic mountains to receive their clay and with it the keys of such wisdom as was theirs. Before all were we, my people and their gods!

"Out of the West we came, from beyond the surging seas, bringing to the Ægian isles the ripened truths of incalculable years, winnowed and perfected in stately cities and colleges and temples over which for countless centuries has rolled the unfathomed ocean that bears to this day our name. Ruled we in the Golden Age, our dominion paramount, our priestly princes companions of the high gods of whom they learned the Eternal Principles, governing in love and kindness. Our ships were on every sea, yea, and in the air above, for thus my fathers in the morning of Time crossed the tempestuous waters.^[1]

[1] Scott-Elliott's "Atlantis" contains an absorbingly interesting chapter as to the aerial services of the Atlanteans.

"Now only I and some hidden few in far-distant cloud-swept heights are left of the myriad favoured peoples before came Error, the black magic of the nether gods by which must mortals perish and the exalted purpose of the eternal Bright Ones be for æons frustrated.... Of mine own house were those who, at the mandate of the deathless ones, fared forth to that chill clime where later roamed Goths and Vandals, almost themselves brute beasts, lacking Wisdom's torch. Thence in Time's fullness came we hither to mankind's cradle.^[2] Our cities rose anew and our temples reached toward the heavens where now is naught but desert desolation. There ruled we long, walking circumspectly in the great Law.

[2] The finding of the skull and many of the bones of a child of approximately 60,000 B.C. in a prehistoric deposit forming a camp site of an early human race, at Mechta-el-Arbi, Algeria, was announced in May, 1927, by Alonzo W. Pond, director of the Logan African Expedition of Beloit College, then just returned to the United States. "An interesting point which emerges from Professor Raymond Dart's discovery (of this pre-human skull in Central Africa)," says Professor G. Elliott Smith, of the University of London, "is that it unqualifiedly supports Darwin's theory that Africa was probably the original home of the human family. I have always inclined to that view, as both of those unenterprising relatives of the human family, the gorilla and the chimpanzee, happen to live in the forests of Africa."

"And whilst we trod as commanded the appointed way, all things to be desired were ours, immeasurable power and vast possessions, the treasures of the earth and the keys of knowledge, so that there have been none like us, children of the gods and kings!

"But in the long march of ages the seeds of foolish pride were sown, ripened and spread. The mandates of the gods were set at naught, their very titles usurped. Selfish ambitions wrought steadily for destruction. The wrath of the Bright

Ones was kindled; and at the last celestial vengeance fell in so great a flood as to wash clean the iniquitous earth. Saved from that death were but a handful in the end found faithful, with such barbarians as had not received the Light and were in their ignorance blameless.

"To those who had walked in righteousness remained the master secrets, to share which few, alas, of the passing generations have been since found worthy.

"The guardianship of Wisdom was my father's and my father's fathers. Last of our ancient people, each in his hour long since entered the Peace of the Silence. The span of a hundred years and more is now mine own; and, walking overlong in solitude while men come and go, I weary and would wed with Death, yet may not claim that precious boon of Rest while yet the Trust is mine!"

So fantastic a rambling tale I never before had heard; and, while I could but partly grasp its purport, my thought was that age and superstitions had turned the poor creature's head. All races have their legends of the Flood; this much at least was understandable, but as to the Ancient Wisdom and much else, I, being little learned, set down her vapourings for visionary nonsense. Nor could I see, bringing myself to issues that pressed for action, wherein her fables concerned me or the maid. And this I urged, reminding her of the Princess and her plight. What place or part had she in this fanciful history? Who was she and where now? What dangers threatened? The practical and the present most concerned us, not myths of a long dead past. Thus I spoke bluntly, recalling her to the point.

"Alas, even thou art blind," she answered sadly. "Nay, hear me out, then, although unbelieving. Wherein the Princess is concerned will in its course appear—thine own part also. Naught have I spoken lacking point and purpose. That keeping in thy mind, I pray give heed."

Once more she paused, searching her recollections, or so I thought. When she went on, her eyes held unshed tears; her quavering voice betrayed unguessed emotion.

"I would thou couldst read the letter," she lamented, "for then would my task be lightened. It was her mother's message to him who in time would come—therefore to thee!"

At last something tangible, on which one could take hold! Nor was I overmuch surprised; some such conclusion, but informulate, had been mine while I studied that faded script.

"I cannot with certainty name the language in which it is written," said I, getting to my feet, "but I have seen much the same before. Yes, and in the self-same hand, or memory tricks me. In Gentil's house it was. I doubt not he can translate this. The stead is near. If we make haste..."

Speech failed me abruptly. She, too, had risen. Gone was all trace of tears or womanly weakness. The cringing mite seemed suddenly transformed, vibrant with indignation. I felt myself opposed by a subtle force against which I could do nothing. More, too, I both felt and feared it, counting myself no craven.

"Forever accurst is he!" she almost shrieked. "For him the gods reserve their direst punishments. A recreant knave forsworn on every hand, through him comes worse than death to all who trust him... Foul and unfaithful renegade, his doom is sealed. Name him not more as thou loveth life!"

Rage choked her, shaking her withered frame. I could but stare, dumbfounded and at sea. The farmer to me had seemed a quiet, eccentric sort, inoffensive and well disposed—a weakling, perchance, but in sooth no villain.

"Thou knowest him not at all, this thrice perjured priest," she broke in on my thought with her strange prescience. "Thou seest not to the black heart, the coward soul. Harken and judge anew. This rascal Russian once was a man of parts, well born, well learned, ridden by high ambitions. He gave himself to his Church, and her vows were snapped as a slender thread. He gave himself to his country, and betrayed her. He took to himself a wife, a fair and fragile flower, whose life he shattered and whose grave he dug, even as he killed her soul. He once had a child——"

My mind leaped to Meisje and my pulses quickened.

"Go on—go on!" I urged. Her angry eyes met mine. Again she read my thought.

"Even so," said she, "but learn further if thou wouldst save thy feet from stumbling... A score of years have flown, as time now is reckoned, since there came hither, where I dwelt with the spirits of my people, a man, his woman, and their girl-child, the parents footsore and worn, Death riding close. It was the noon of summer and all the parched and blistering veldt gasped under wave on wave of quivering heat, searing leaf and blade. The waterholes were turned to dust-dry, whitened pits, to which came staggering gaunt quagga^[3] and klipspringer,^[4] dassie and duiker, lion and leopard, too, ferocity and fear alike forgotten in common anguish of thirst, to leave their picked bones together, the aasvogel^[5] having feasted. Only here in my sanctuary was Nature's life-blood—plenteous water, whispering trees and waving grass, the air humming with the beat of many wings. Thus the gods favour those who forget them not. Thus was it made plain that I walk in honour with the lords of earth and sky.

[3] Zebra.

[4] A small rock-jumping antelope, rather like a chamois.

[5] Vultures.

"From the pool I first saw them come, faint and faltering, to where the stead now smiles and drowzes. Sore angered was I, for this was mine own place, the abode and the grave of my people, to which none came unbidden. Here in the still watches walked the dead of many generations, communing with the tranquil stars, so the kaffirs whispered over their evening fires. Nor was I minded to disturb this thought, but rather to nurture it. Sankaeli knew these my hills for the home of the shadow people, nor would he or his boldest warrior for all Africa's herds have dared the tabu time had set on cliff and vale. Twice or thrice in a season I saw this chief, when he bade me to his kraal, doing me all honour. Mayhap he sought a charm to shield him from a foe's assegai or to smooth the course of courtship; perchance he was vexed by dreams and needs must have me read their meaning. Or a favourite wife had fallen sick, or a thief held cattle.... His people were as their lord, seeking me with gifts in their hands and honey on their lips when racked by pain or by misfortune beset, trusting in me much, but fearing more.

"My watchers had forewarned me of the approach of strangers, but so haggard and spent were they that the word as it reached me was that the dead walked hither. This, when I had come down to them, indeed seemed truth, for they slept as do those that wake not, the child in the mother's arms.... And I, who in hate had minded swiftly to destroy, was moved to sudden compassion, in such sore straights were those hapless creatures, blanched to the hue of chalk, whereat I marvelled. The man was large and properly proportioned, but weak of nose and chin, so that, albeit he slept, I knew him futile and timorous, to which as well his lack of useful gear and their defenceless state bore witness. The woman, in tattered calico, was fair and fragile, yet had she once been wondrous beautiful—helpless to serve herself, but strong to suffer and to comfort others. Such slender vines often are strangely strong.

"But it was the babe that filled my woman eyes, a winsome mite of dimpling, delicious curves, fair as a lily's bloom, a rose in either cheek, her tumbled hair a crown of rippling gold. Two wee soft hands caressed the mother's breast; and I, who had never known the pain and bliss of womanhood perfected, choked with the longing to press her to my own."

Here the seeress fell silent, busied with memories, which sensing I forbore to press her, keen though I was to hear. Long minutes dragged as she crouched motionless, her head in her cupped hands.

"It was Sankaeli's jest to send them hither," she at length went on. "By me had his will been crossed, and in their coming he saw a means to vex me. Eager for spoils and power, he had been all for war upon the outlanders; my bones bespoke disaster for his arms. One gains not favour whose words run counter to a ruler's mood. Yet dared he not defy the spirits' warning, whereby his head remains upon his neck. For that he gives no thanks, as is the way of man, but would return me ill.

"I know not how this wanderer gained his ear and, as he thought, safe refuge. The king had wished them dead while

he spake them fair; yet would he have had their blood on other hands than his. I was to be the catspaw in his game, and mine the head to fall if vengeance followed. He must have had a crafty counsellor, who, else I have lost my wits, is that same ringed snake by whom thou wert shrewdly tricked. His guile serves him no more.

"Forsake the place of my people I could not, nor lift the wholesome fear of the spirit folk that kept from my domain the ill-smelling blacks. But for the child I should not have thought twice, but loosed upon the pair such horrors as must have sent them staggering forth again, to leave their bleaching bones on the baked veldt. But who could visit death on a sleeping babe? My heart warmed as I watched her slumber; and when blue eyes opened wide to study me in appraising puzzlement, the while twin rows of milky teeth showed in an awakening yawn, my arms went out to her. And then she smiled, and, chuckling happily, crept to me—and I was thenceforth her slave.

"But I waste words: I did not harry them forth to perish, but gave them aid and counsel. Also such speech I had with their kaffir folk as bound these to loyal service, whereat their chief marvelled much. The man in sooth knows farming. The stead shaped and grew apace. Crops flourished; orchards bloomed and fruited; flocks and herds waxed fat and multiplied. The gods prospered their hands and none came to harass them, for, while they knew it not, it had been spread afar that they walked in my shadow. The woman learned to smile, though born to sorrow. The child laughed and throve, a butterfly ever a-wing. Their sky showed not a cloud. And yet I read ill omens in the stars, death in my dreams; while grief on grief was written in the bones. Wherefore I guarded close the little maid, and early taught those who served that she was by the spirits sent and in their care. And she giving love for love, contentment filled my days. The mother, too, when she had learned to trust, leaned much upon me, herself ill-fitted for homely tasks and trials.

"So passed two sowings and reapings and naught befell. Yet ever the man moved silent and apart, fear mirrored in his face. Let but the king be named and panic seized him lacking cause or reason. To Sankaeli he sent the pick of herds and flocks, with choicest fruits and honey, or soft-tanned, bright-dyed skins and deftly fashioned trinkets for favourite wives.

"Through the third season his melancholy grew, and he was wont to walk the live-long night like an unquiet ghost. Then journeyed he forth himself after great preparation and countless changes of mind, so that one knew not what was toward from one day to another. A fourth moon waned ere we saw him again, returned with great store of goods, for the conveyance of which many carts and oxen were needed, which had he from the king. Thereafter he would spend hour on hour testing his weapons, albeit no raider threatened and he sought not game. Words had he for none except the child, on whom he would gaze for hours, brooding blackly, the while she romped and chattered. Or of a sudden he would crush her so fiercely to him I feared for her tender bones; and then, putting her from him roughly, stalk wordlessly forth, coming not back for days. His thoughts he shared with none, wherefore the woman grieved. I did but wait, watchful lest any harm befall my pet.

"Harvest time came and all were in the fields from rise to set of sun, save only I, the mother, and the maid. Mid-day had passed and summer's heat lay heavy. The stead was wrapped in slumbrous stillness but for the soothing drone of humming-bird and bee. Within the farmhouse, shades drawn, my mistresses slept. The dogs barked noisily, and, going forth to still them, I found one of Sankaeli's counsellors had come on business of his lord. His word, he said, was for the master's ear; to him he straightway went. Naught more saw I of him; nor yet when evening fell had the Baas returned. His wife was minded to meet him, and set forth toward the fields, her dog running before her, barking for joy of life. Once did she stop, looking back to blow a kiss from her white fingers. Night deepened and she came not. I watched for her, the child sleeping in my arms. Midnight had struck ere hurrying footsteps sounded and the man strode swiftly past me and to his room. His face was pale and contorted. He gave no heed to me nor to the child....

"I thought the woman dead when presently I found her, outstretched by the new-planted gums. Yet did her heart beat, fitfully and weak; and while I chafed her wrists, her eyelids fluttered open. Despair was in her look, and hopeless horror. Long did she search my face, fighting for every breath. The Shadow was plain upon her, and I would have fetched her man but that her fingers gripped me and she shook her head.

"'This is the end,' she said, so faintly I could but hear, my ear to the chill lips.... 'No, bring him not near to me, and trust him never more.... Of all inhuman monsters he is most foul.' Choking, she ceased, lying so still and wan I thought she had passed the gates. No pulse throbbed, and I would have gone to arouse the stead but that her clutch held fast. Again her eyes opened slowly; her lips moved.

"My child—my little one,' she barely breathed. 'Now must you—care for her—save her, from—her—father. Traitor to his own flesh.' Again strength ebbed and she halted, shuddering. I forced through her set teeth some strengthening drops that fanned the flickering spark. 'It is the heart,' she whispered. 'Long have I known its weakness. A sudden shock—and this day—I heard—I heard.... But time is short. Run quickly, giving speech to none.... Fetch pen and paper hither. I would leave a message. Nay, woman, I die not till thou comest! I must not—will not!' Her voice trailed off into ominous silence. Then, starting up with vigour that amazed, she sternly ordered:

"Go, Zeete, and be swift! Life is on thy haste.'

"She seemed in no worse state when I returned. She had kept the Reaper waiting by sheer will.

"Woman, thou art all my hope,' she feebly gasped, swaying in my arms the while she wrote that which I wouldst thou could read. 'Her most unnatural father dooms her to worse than death.... Thou must outmatch him in cunning. Be deaf to all he saith.... Watch over her, sleeping and waking.... Be father and mother both, for she will have none but thee.... Take her away—and quickly.... Hide her, keeping close thy secret. Away—away from the stead.... Trust none, till thou findest one of her own kind and colour serving government.... To him give then this writing ... and thy trust ... is done.'

"She pressed the paper upon me and fell back. I closed the unseeing eyes. Grey dawn showed ere I regained the stead, none knowing I had moved therefrom."

Again the tale halted vexingly. I could but wait till she took up its thread again.

"Seest thou how hard a task was mine? I could ask aid of none save the baboon people, obedient to my will. That shown to the dying, brooks no question. Also was I selfishly minded to keep the child. The man I saw little of; our paths crossed seldom. He was as one distraught, deep bitten by madness. Two weeks had flown since the grave claimed his wife. It was a moonless night, the stead wrapped in sleep, that he sought me out, his eyes heavy and bloodshot for lack of rest.

"'Tis said thou art a witch and canst read what time holds in store?' he harshly challenged. 'Oft have I heard of such devil's magic and I am minded to put it to the test. Set out the fittings of thy mummerly. What next will Fate pile on my wretchedness? See, I have gold! What is not done for this yellow god of little men? Invoke thy spirits and the fee is thine!'

"Naught answered I, nor held it over-strange he should seek my aid, but drew from my pouch a handful of knucklebones and cast them upon the ground, whereon they took form and pattern. So may those having the skill read as from thy printed pages. They fell into the outlines of a skull, a thrown spear, and a stake ringed round with specks of black that whirled and eddied in the breeze of night. These for a space I scanned, until words came unbidden to my lips:

"Thy earthly pilgrimage ends here,' I told him, 'where runs the ancient law that for ill deeds must be atonement made, even with life itself. Here thou wilt live beset by phantom fears bred of unquiet conscience. Rich thou wilt grow in lands, in cattle, and in that gold of thine, but find not peace or solace or delight save only in kindly deeds, for so alone is lightened Error's load. Twice seven times shall summer come and go, and thou shalt gaze into thy yawning grave—a shaft of thine own forging. Yet empty waits the pit, expectant of thy bones. In violence comes thy end, by savage men. Their women spit upon and taunt thee as, round and round, their brats with laughter turn thee. And when comes welcome Death, banishing mortal pains, only the birds shall give thee sepulchre. Thus speak the Spirits in truth.'

"Thy spirits are ill-disposed, their judgments harsh,' he sighed when I had done. 'Thy dire prophecies touch but me, however? What of the child?'

"Now had I truly sought to read her page, as since I have not once but many times. I must, as thou knowest, have cast the bones anew. This I did not, for came to me the thought that I might shape occasion to my ends. Wherefore I made pretence of pondering long; and when again I spake, no guidance had my tongue. The child, I told him, walked but a little time in sunshine.

"And what comes then?' he questioned anxiously.

"I feigned to find the reading over hard, the whilst I gave myself to hurried thought. At length the die was cast, for good or ill.

"The spirits write," I falsely prophesied, 'that ere this moon be spent she goes to the tree people, returning not!'

"A moment more and I would have unsaid the word. Had he but looked, he must have known me for a liar and ashamed. But he had turned away and tarried not. I doubt he fully knew what was foretold, yet on my head was visited his anger, for I was driven forth ere the next sun had set. The child was given in care of a kaffir wench, and for days on days I could but see and guard her by studied stealth. Her favourite nooks none knew so well as I, and these I frequented with a great bitch baboon that carefully was instructed in her task. It so fell out as I had thought it would. The babe was for a moment forgotten at her play, and when the black girl screamed in wild alarm it was too late. My faithful beast had seized the toddling mite and was in flight with her for our most secret cavern in the cliffs. There soon she was in my arms, her fright forgotten in joy of seeing me.

"Search, long and barren, was made in kloof and cave where dwell the baboon folk. These one and all he ruthlessly pursued, to butcher wantonly, wherefore his fields were ravaged and his cattle scattered, so that again he came to me for counsel lest all he had be lost. And I, who had sown in falsehood the seed of Error, ate of the bitter fruit, my guiltless servants slaughtered whilst my lips were sealed. Nor could I plead the gods to turn back time and give me my yesterday, for in my planned deceit lay safety for her who now was more to me than even the law of Truth. None thought to seek her in our fastnesses. Who looks for life and youth in these still places of the forgotten dead? There dwelt we, hidden snug, the while she budded and bloomed in winsome girlhood, so eager and apt of mind it was a boon to teach her. Now is she ripe in all wisdom whereof I hold the keys—fearless and just as well—so that throughout the land many kings and warriors hold her in awe as daughter of the gods.

"The thought to name her my heiress was born of the finding of that uncommon peltry that she wears. Sacred it is to priests and vestals of the Ancient Faith; and when I knew it to have come from the great hills afar, where sit the Deathless Ones guarding the Master Words, I read it for a sign that her sending was part of the all-wise plan. Thereby I knew my own transgression pardoned, and went forward in strengthened zeal to fit her against the day when I am no more and she in turn shall tend the Living flame. Over-young she is, yet hath she wit and courage beyond her years—sinless till anger assailed her, as thou didst witness, bringing, as ever it must, deserved punishment.

"See now how our misdeeds rise up against us to set at naught our schemes—burst the bright bubble of our self-conceit! When boastful pride proclaims the strands of our affairs in our own hands alone, then are we most the playthings of the fates. Here had we lived in quietude and peace, unvexed by humankind, these many years. My little maid had come to womanhood, her secret doubly safe since she was mourned as dead and time had dulled the edge of the father's grief. Then, in a thrice, disaster fell full-fledged. She and he met by tragical mischance, and instantly there stirred in the breast of each the call of blood to blood. No word has he yet spoken—why I know not; but of a surety his eyes at long last are opened and danger threatens most when I had thought it past.

"Not from him only: tales have been spun to catch Sankaeli's ear, wherefore he would feast his dull eyes on the White Witch's beauty. His people seek her—now near, now far—as though she were a slave to serve his pleasure! And, wanting courage themselves to brave the spirits and storm these halls of death, hither they bring yellow strangers lacking their wholesome caution, so that each day the double peril grows. Thrice hath she all but fallen into their snares; and as their number swells with the old king's lust, my heart is faint within me and my servants falter.... Also the time is come to fulfil my trust. Henceforth it is for thee to guard the lily maid. Be faithful, and the gods reward!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRISONER-PRINCESS

Thus she made end, and I, confused and astounded, gave myself up to thought. Much now was clear that had before

perplexed, yet still intruded a major mystery: Why had the child been wrested from her father? Was the poor mother mad, to trust instead this pigny of the wild? Wherein lay now my duty? To straightway go to Gentil with his daughter, or do as Zeete pressed me, speaking with the dead mother's voice? Instinct or intuition pleaded her cause; not till I had probed her reasons would I again put trust in the farmer-recluse. Meanwhile, to safeguard Meisje was clearly my part. That faded letter should go to Pretoria for translation by the first out-post....

A hideous clamour beyond the massive door broke suddenly on my thoughts. Zeete sprang up to throw it wide, and there came tumbling in a chattering horde of her uncouth beasts, all terrified and many sorely wounded, their panic plainly pictured. Then passed swift interchange of wordless speech, and she turned to me, fierce hate and horror in her wizened face.

"Quickly, or all is lost!" she tensely urged. "Sankaeli's crew are come—their yellow allies with them! They lay close hidden to take unawares her guard. Our Princess they bear to the black king's kraal——"

I waited for no more, but, looking to my weapons, was on my feet. She took from a curious cabinet her little glowing wand and (Nano scrambling awkwardly ahead to scout the way) led forth through the painted corridor, the other blood-spattered beasts crowding upon her heels.

"Twenty there are, no less," she whispered as we ran. "None must escape.... Happily the king hath sworn his wrath should harm befall her."

I had no breath to answer. That tenuous trail was never meant for human foot. Scant inches it showed, skirting precipitous heights, no buckspoor ever so aerial or erratic. Yet the little doctress skimmed it lightly, sure-footed as her baboon friends, alike indifferent to the dizzy deeps ever yawning below. One single mis-step ... But the pace left no time either for thought or caution. A hundred nightmare horrors each moment merged, yet I felt no fear—rather a driving urge that called ever for greater speed, laughing at breakneck risks.

Thus, when we were suddenly come to a deep and densely-wooded donga, and Zeete and her brutes took instantly to the over-arching trees, I likewise made no pause, but, gripping a far-flung bough, swung out into empty space and chuckled jubilant at being first on the farther bank. There, waiting for them to cross, I cast about for the onward spoor, vexed to discern no sign. The others joining me seemed to read at a glance signposts in the tangled forest, and pressed on headlong through the unbroken bush that tore my clothes to tatters and so lashed face and hands that when presently we halted, the while our wise old Nano tested the mountain air with twitching nostrils, I was drenched with bloody sweat.

Again came hurried conference in those harsh, throaty gutturals that now perforce I knew for primitive speech, intelligible to the sorceress at least; and she, interpreting, said that the raiding *impi*^[1] but lately had passed in haste. Old Nano melted at once into the brush, and we went on, taking each step with care lest snapping of branch or twig betray our presence. Thus passed an hour of toilsome climbing and perilous descents in which we gained, perhaps, a quarter-mile, when, noiseless as he had gone, our hairy scout returned and forthwith our course was reshaped for higher ground. Thence we worked forward to a well-bushed kranz falling sharply to a small open glade, from which mounted a thin spiral of bluish smoke.

[1] Armed body of natives.

Toward this we crept with heightened caution, and there came in view the fire itself, enclosed in a loose-built schans round which were sprawled eight or ten kaffir fighting men, with three in ragged blue, by which I knew them as being from the mines. Other blacks busied themselves about the cooking-pots, and four were posted as watchers against surprise. Eighteen in all I counted, nor were all in sight—too heavy odds to venture direct attack. Little hope had I of further aid from our docile beasts that even then were whimpering with fright; while Zeete, aged and unarmed, was more like to be an added care than of any service where force, not craft, must tell.

Strain sight as I could, no glimpse could I gain of Meisje, and my heart sank lest we had come too late. Not till that

torturing moment had I really known how much I loved her; and with that knowledge, grief consumed me which quickly turned to rage. Her villainous captors should at least pay dearly. The world swam red before me, and I would have dashed forth foolishly to deal and welcome death had not a hand clutched firmly at my shoulder and Zeete's unshaken voice given new life to hope.

"The maid, I doubt not, is held beyond the thorn bush, for there, seest thou, a double guard is set? They guess not we are here; thus much is gained. Now shall these black dogs and yellow taste of the spirits' vengeance.... Make thou no move or sound, befall what may. I go to bring her hither and to punish!"

Such certitude was hers I could not doubt some cunning plan was shaping in her brain; and knowing well how secretly she could move, I did but nod agreement to her will. I would have pressed knife or revolver on her, seeing her weaponless, whereat she smiled and pushed them from her.

"Nay, I need not such tools," she whispered simply. "Watch thou and mark the justice of the gods."

She signed to Nano, and he, with other of our baboons, stole away, to be swallowed instantly by the bush; and when I turned again to speak to her, she, too, had vanished, silent as a shadow. I settled then to watch with pounding heart, straining my sight to pierce the clump of thorn. The warlike preparations of the camp amazed me; on that I puzzled much.... Minutes crawled leaden-footed. The shadows lengthened on the mountain-side. The birds forgot their panic and twittered happily in the nearer trees; and from a fallen banyan, a *koorhaan*^[2] eyed me inquisitively and chattered his poor opinion of intruders.

[2] Bustard; literally Scolding-cock.

I had watched and waited ages, it seemed, in growing torment of inactivity, when from the matted jungle beyond came crashing of underbrush, as though someone were in headlong haste. My first thought was that others of their ilk were joining the abductors, but such would surely move less noisily. The camp, too, buzzed into action, betokening surprise and apprehension. Warriors seized their arms and sank suddenly into the earth, adept in self-concealment. Zeete it could not be, for open ground intruded, not to be crossed unseen. No longer could I sit idly by, and, all eyes luckily being upon the bush, I ran, crouched low, for such scant cover as promised nearer view of that patch of thorn. This, happily, I gained, winded but undiscovered, and dropping to hands and knees, crawled forward to where I could discern what there went on.

The witch had guessed aright. Meisje was there, a prisoner but unharmed, to my vast relief. No trembling, affrighted captive, she stood proudly erect, her hands bound at her back, smiling indifferent contempt of those who held her. Four guards there were, but as I studied how they might best be dealt with, one dashed away to join his ambushed comrades. But three left! Such odds were welcome, yet must there be no sound. A shot, and they would buzz like bees about me, my own fate sealed, and hers. Knife it would have to be, both swift and sure, taking them one by one. But how, while time availed? It grew dusk. Dare I wait for the shield of darkness? If Zeete were at hand, her fertile brain might hatch some cunning plan to take them unawares. What had become of her? Scant yards away the bushes stirred. I stared; something there moved! No enemy, else there were no need for stealth. A gaunt prehensile hand parted the sheltering leafage. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Zeete's face, placid and confident.

At once I started to creep toward her, when softly she slipped from cover, prone on the ground, seeming to glide with a serpent's fluid-ease towards the thorn clump, the prisoner, and the unwitting guards. What scheme was in her mind I could not guess. Faintly a cricket chirped in the short grass through which she squirmed and twisted, all but invisible even to me, who knew that she was there.

Then I heard Meisje speaking—saw the guards turn towards her, their eyes intent, their scarred and furrowed faces clouding darkly. What she was saying I could not conjecture, but in her pose was queenly dignity; her voice rang out disdainfully, as though she spoke from a throne to cringing slaves. Her steady eyes held theirs compellingly, so that when Zeete uprose, spectrelike, so close behind one, she might have touched him, the guards still remained oblivious.

I looked to see a knife flash in her hand. Instead it held that little ancient wand, the ruby tip mysteriously aglow. It traced an arc of fire behind the muscled back, and forthwith the man staggered drunkenly, shaken as with an ague, and then, crumpling at the knees, fell soundlessly. Instinctively I knew that he was dead.

Even as he sank to earth the wand again was waved; another collapsed, spinning grotesquely as he went down, and the last of them turned hastily, too late awakened to impending peril. The movement brought him face to face with Death's wizened messenger. Once more her baton flashed, and, whether it was because he was farther away I know not, he swayed, but kept his feet, as, with a strangled sob, he clapped both hands to his affrighted eyes.

It was as though a lightning stroke had seared but failed to kill.

Events marched quickly in the next few seconds. One flashing knife-stroke severed Meisje's bonds. A baboon barked excitedly from the thick brush where but a moment before I had watched from cover. The Princess ran lightly thither, giving me a smile that set my pulses pounding. Zeete spoke shortly to the shaken guard, who shrank from her in terror undisguised. She beckoned me to her side.

"Bind me this dog," she said. "He goes back with us"; and as I slipped the cuffs upon his wrists, she harshly urged him forward. Not once did we slacken pace until we had regained the kranz where she had left me. From there we saw the rude camp hastily deserted, the baffled warriors one by one returning to stare bewilderedly at the dead but unwounded men, then bolt precipitately, leaving even weapons where they lay. Our prisoner gave no trouble. He moved as he was bade, in ashen fear, as though to waiting death, which was indeed his thought.

The moon had fully risen, flooding the forest with shifting shadows ere we returned to the cave palace; and while we followed no man-made path on the dizzy heights, I gave no thought to their danger, for I trod on air. Meisje kept close to me, even contriving at times to walk by my side, her hand snuggled in mine. The friendly baboons romped joyously ahead, as if they also knew we came home in triumph.

Much more regard I had for the ugly creatures when Zeete told me how they had staged the commotion in the adjacent bush to so command attention from the blacks that we might risk a rescue.

My Golden Girl had also played well her part, for her quick ear had caught the witch's signal that I had thought no more than an insect's chirp; and instantly she had claimed and held attention of her guards while we crept up unseen.

CHAPTER IX

THE JUSTICE OF THE GODS

Ere we had reached the caves the moon rode low, a blood-red scimitar hung just above the summit of the range. The night was still and cloudless, yet of the myriad stars but seven shone like jewels in the velvet sky. One barely topped the horizon of the hills, and this one Zeete named for the crafty king, in its decline portent of coming death. The moon presaged red war, so said the signs; and, as it seemed confirmatory, the hills of a sudden echoed the throb of tom-toms—a dull and distant booming answered by thunderous drums nearer at hand.

"The spear even now is flung," Meisje exclaimed, stopping to listen. "Perchance this surly fellow knoweth what goes forward?"

She halted our glooming captive and words passed.

"They dance at Sankaeli's kraal with certain Bhagwan to-day come from Bambata's country," said the sorceress. "At last the old king chances war, despite my counsel. Soon shall his wives be widows."

Since feast and dance would find no Sankaeli missing, we hastened on with less anxiety, in silence broken only by the insistent drum. A single deep sonorous note, full-throated from the hollow earth itself, it came at intervals exactly spaced, to be repeated, fainter and fainter still, by the reverberent hills—monotonous, inexorable, beating upon the brain.

Meisje now took the lead, light-footed, confident, with words for none, withdrawn into the citadel of her thoughts. I strove to sound her mind.

"It is the drum," she whispered. "It calls—it calls.... Thou couldst not understand, being of different blood."

She did not know, then! She still believed herself kin to the little Bushwoman! Zeete had shared her secret with me alone! I pondered the complex problem as we pushed on. What was my course to be? No interruption came, only the pulsing of that calling drum. One thing alone was certain: she must be placed in safety without delay. But where? No answer yet had offered when the cavern loomed darkly before us.

* * * * *

That was a night of nights, my whole life's happiest! We had the palace chamber to our two selves; for, having thanked her gods, Zeete had again set forth, whither she did not say. In sweet companionship the golden hours raced. Was ever mortal maid for love so fashioned, so rarely beautiful, yet all unspoiled! Wise far beyond her years, still was she all unlearned in social tricks, pretences, and deceits; withal a merry, teasing puss, setting no little value upon herself. Frankly she owned her love, but would be wooed; being wooed, she would be quickly wed. And, as is her sex's way, she must be told again and yet again how much beloved she was.

Did I in very truth find her so fair? What did I mean by saying her lips were honey? Nay, words were hollow—she would instead be shown! Why should we not here live out our lives together? Where lay my home, and truly did not wives wait in my kraal, nor slaves, serving in hut and field? How many cattle were within my *scher*[\[1\]](#)? ... Funny, isn't it, how little below the surface civilized woman remains the savage?

[\[1\]](#) A protection of brush and trees against wild animals.

Cattle I must have, naturally! That brought a question voiced with shy hesitancy: How many beasts was it in my mind to give for her?

I feigned confusion. Being but newly come to it, how could I yet know her country's ways? What was a proper price?

On that she studied long, regarding me with quizzical concern.... Fifty fat cows surely would not be over-much, for was she not a chieftainess, young and not ill-favoured? ... Fifty, at least, she thought....

But when, to tease, I doubtfully shook my head, blue eyes puckered anxiously.

"Not fifty, then, lord—forty were ample," she amended quickly. Had I not sworn she was all the world to me? Was she not apt in household arts and curing of wounds and fevers—tutored in wisdom also? ... Yet forty would indeed be two score, and who had need for more than a score of both toes and fingers? Twenty should well suffice! ... Ten she had of her own, she suddenly bethought; they should count as mine! She laughed in sheer delight, claiming a kiss in payment.

How could I lightly jest with one so sweet? Dear Miss Simplicity! Who or what was I to claim such maiden faith? Me she had known only; what was to happen when other and better men swarmed round her like flies about a honeypot? The thought was vinegar. She saw me scowl and blamed herself unjustly as the cause. And when I sought to make the problem plain, she laid restraining fingers on my lips.

"Nay, lover mine, such are but empty words," she gently chided. "If in this world of thine be men like unto gods in

wisdom as in strength, yet art thou only mine, as I am thine. Ever it shall be so. The gods have said that I shall mate with thee—wherefore thy doubts?"

She would have no more. Nor was I over-minded to press the matter, resolved instead to spare her vain regrets. She should go to Pretoria till the skies had cleared. There she would be quite safe. There, too, were schools for her education, English, of course, included. She listened, wide-eyed and piquantly perplexed.

"I like it not," she faltered. "But thy word is indeed my law. Had I my will I should bide here with thee, sharing both sweet and bitter. This storm will pass; yet whilst it blows I would be with my lord. Also might I not serve him? None knows this land so well, save only grand-dame! Nor do my words lack weight with certain kings.... I would indeed learn thy speech, but from thy lips."

Hard it was to deny her coaxing, yet I had to be firm. Why we should load ourselves with countless social shackles of our own forging was not for me to say. I could but tell her thus and so did my gods decree. Whereat she pouted, holding such gods in very light esteem.

"Will there be other maids at these dull schools of thine?" she questioned, yielding obedience. "And must I suffer anew the cold and hunger, murmuring not?"

That such was not our custom was some scant comfort. Again she smiled. Would I be sure often to come to her, so she might live counting the empty days? How long must she be banished from my side?

Night waned. Time fled unheeded in sweet content that each had now the other. Dawn came unseen, Zeete with it. Her face proclaimed ill news.

Sankaeli's fighting men were come in numbers. Already the more adventurous trod the ancient way. Emboldened by the example of the Chinese, and walking in mounting fear of the old king's threats, they ventured the dread cave's mouth, but halted there, still fearful of the unseen and the unknown. Nano's troops were scattered in dismay. We now must count upon ourselves alone.... There was a secret way by which I might contrive escape, taking the Princess with me.

"More than her life is sought," she added anxiously. "Her care now is thine, remember!"

"No time to lose, then," I urged, impatient of delay. "Jean must carry double. Once on the track we should easily make the Post."

Of this she was not so sure.

"Had day not come it were less hazardous," she pointed out. "Their eyes are many and their ears are sharp. Thou couldst not pass unseen. Perchance I may contrive to draw them hence, so when night's curtain falls thou canst win through. Darkness must be thy friend."

The long day wore, dragging its chain of hours. We ate perfunctorily—caught snatches of fitful sleep—laid plans—prepared for flight.... The palace glories palled. What prisoned splendours can match the golden sunshine and pearly clouds sailing a sapphire sky?

Noon past, Zeete sallied forth in quest of news, not to return till evening, her shadow Nano again with her. She brought scant tidings: the blacks were in great number at the painted hall, but there they halted still. In all the higher hills look-outs were posted. Conditions otherwise were little changed. We were besieged—invested on all sides.

"A yellow one sought closer knowledge of our spirits," she added grimly—"nor was he disappointed.... We cast the carrion forth for them to think upon."

No more she said till she had taken food. Then she must deck herself in the fantastic trappings of her cult—snakeskins and pouch of bones, broad bands of copper on her skinny shanks, necklace of bladders strung upon a cord[2]—the magic wand, of course. She even had found for herself another adder, which coiled about her arm, to my distaste.

[2] Characteristic equipment of African witch doctors and witch-doctresses.

"Those that I meet must not forget my craft," said she. "We go now to work justice. That spearman shall be our witness. For that his life was spared. It is in my mind to set him free that he may pour a tale in his chieftain's ear. I doubt it will overplease the two-faced king."

Our captive had been cast in a tiny cave, more like a cistern, dismal and dark and damp. No watch was set over him; he needed none, fast bound to a smooth-worn post. He seemed to count himself already dead, staring with glassy eyes as we drew near. No question did he ask, nor sue for mercy, but strode forth boldly when his bonds were loosed. He would at least die well; no craven he, to give the dog his due. The strangeness of his comrades' taking off, not normal dread of death, had shaken his stoicism. Alone, in darkness, he had pulled himself together. He followed the windings of the sombre tunnel as bidden, his head held high, speaking no word.

The ancient amphitheatre proved our goal, and this we gained soon after darkness fell. Roofed by the starless sky, the awesome place was weirdly lighted by that whirling and shifting shaft of sulphurous vapour that rose from the yawning pit. Smoke it was not, nor steam—rather a faintly bluish luminous mist giving to all about the hue of death. In college days we used sometimes to make what we called a ghost light giving much the same effect, by pouring alcohol on a bowl of salt, the spirit burning with a sickly flame.

By this uncanny gleam we four paced forward, the little Saab[3] leading, the kaffir next, walking less arrogantly but still maintaining a courageous front. Within the girdling altars formed an ellipse, in length at least a furlong, level and very hard beneath the foot. At either end was raised a massive throne fashioned of huge blocks of granite, the phosphorescent column equidistant between. Upright it reared itself from the black void, into which hewn steps led down. In the pallid, pulsating light itself was lost to view at its middle a narrow wall or causeway bridging the stygian well from side to side, so slight it showed as a mere thread of grey spanning inky emptiness. At either end bulked solid platforms, like all else of stone, so large they might together have held a troop of horse.

[3] Saab or Saan, synonymous for Bushman.

Thrice did we make the circuit of that vast court, to halt at the upper end, above which hung poised in air a single brilliant star. Beneath it loomed one of the rude chairs of state, imposing in its primitive strength of line. To this Meisje would have me mount and seat myself; she had, she said, a part herself to play in what went forward, which I could better view from this post of vantage. And when I would have urged her to remain, she stopped me with a swift love-radiant smile, whispering assurance of her safety.

"Besides, it would grieve the grandmother," she added, soft lips brushing my cheek. "So soon she loses me, dear one—and thou wilt have me away!"

Mounting the moss-covered steps, it came to me how Zeete had spoken of some sort of trial, or so I had sensed the purport of her words. What form this was to take I could not guess—some other fantastic rite of long dead times I fancied, our prisoner by it, perhaps, to learn Fear's chill. As he was to go free, I was content that matters take their course. Whatever wizardry was planned, it would have place and purpose in Zeete's schemes.

Scarce had I climbed to my lofty seat than she had left our captive, bound afresh, on one of those great stands where ended the shadowy bridge. To my amaze a second figure almost at once appeared on the companion platform opposite, thrust forward by unseen hands, to sink there limp and inert as an empty sack. A moment thus he lay, then stealthily raised his head and peered about. I knew him straightway for that same tricky counsellor who had sought my life and by his tale-bearing put our Princess in peril—him that I last had seen in headlong flight.

Scant time I had to puzzle on how he had come there, for faintly there stole upon the air hushed strains of ethereal music, sonorous and sweet, as though a distant mighty organ answered a master's touch. It sang and sobbed, thundered a triumphal pæan, sank to a dulcet whisper, ebbed and flowed—a symphony of the melodic world of Nature: crash of surging surf, caressing winds sweeping the many strings of tree-top harps, singing of sunny streams, matin hymn of birds, the myriad little voices of tranquil night![4]

[4] The Bushmen were accounted the most advanced of any African race in the sister arts of music and dancing.

Entranced, I listened, seeking in vain to fix the source of the majestic chords; and, as the tides of harmony rose and fell, Zeete on one side, Meisje on the other, were slowly traversing that fragile causeway towards the tremulous pillar of wintry light.

They did not pass from view, the inner ends of the aerial pathway being gained, but stood at left and right of the translucent shaft, contrasting statues in creamy marble and dull ebony—vestals of Light and Darkness, Day and Night, Beauty and Ugliness, Love and Hate, Good and Evil! Together they made obeisance to East and West, the womb of frail mortality and its tomb, Alpha and Omega—invoking the secret forces of Earth, Air and Sea, while the celestial music throbbed and pulsed, sank shade by shade, and melted into silence.

High, then, and shrill, the reedy voice of the tiny prophetess was raised, piercing the unearthly stillness in a hypnotic chant, in time with which the two drew nearer to the mystic light and flung to the quivering column handfuls of golden dust. This being absorbed in that luminous fountain, a faint, delicious perfume stole upon the senses. The swaying mist lifted higher and yet higher, grew and spread, circling, whirling, eddying, to become a great cloud of ever-changing colour, now rose, now saffron, the blue of Delhi turquoise, royal topaz. It flooded all, semi-diaphanous, scarce man-height above the earth, to billow in drifts of kaleidoscopic hues and patterns, invading every nook and crevice back to the encircling hills.

Slowly the soft radiance melted in upper air; the stupendous court was drenched in tropic sunshine, and what had seemed delusion bred of the rainbow mist stood out distinct in the clear light of day: the colossal amphitheatre, rising tier by tier, no more a crumbling monument of the buried past, but a nobly proportioned structure bedecked for festival and peopled by an innumerable multitude, the crowded terraces gay with fluttering banners and silken purple and crimson hangings, agleam with the brave trappings of beauty and panoply of rank—rare fabrics of vivid tints, lustrous jewels, sheen of dazzling armour, stalwart soldiery at their posts, the atmosphere surcharged with eager life and tense expectancy, all eyes fixed upon the black-paved court within the chain of altars.

These, too, no more were mere mouldering mounds of crumbling stone, but stunned the eye, gleaming like new-fallen snow in the blaze of sunlight, attended by battalions of white-robed priests with gold and silver ceremonial vessels and rhythmically swinging censers, while flower-decked neophytes, both youths and maidens, divinely fair, performed their sacred dance. Altars themselves were heaped with tokens of a bounteous harvest and a prosperous people—luscious and fragrant fruits, bursting sheaves of golden grain, the unblemished best of herds and flocks, treasure of gold and gems, ivory and peacock plumes, companies of sturdy slaves, the spoil of martial prowess. Curling wisps of smoke from countless braziers impinged on the crystal air.

Yet silence over all! The hush of waiting!

I also looked toward the yawning pit, almost alone unchanged in the strange transformation for which little more than a breathing-space had sufficed: the leprous light had become a lambent flame piercing the azure sky. This living fire rose midway from the frail causeway, which now I saw had a protective balustrade, rounded and very dark, its close-spaced supports fashioned like serpents with upraised heads. The solid plateaux to which the structure stretched on north and south were filled with great barred cages that might well hold the most savage beasts; and forth and back before these paced Ethiopian guards with leathern shields and bronze-tipped spears, stalwart and seasoned men.

Straining to see beyond the barriers of these bars I, strangely, was not surprised that intervening objects were no

impediment to my questing eyes. The cells, save two, were empty. In one, Sankaeli's intriguing vizier cowered, whimpering and affrighted, a loathly thing on which a passing sentry turned to spit. The other tenanted cage contained our kaffir captive, erect, alert, his gnarled fingers gripping the bars, through which he peered with lively curiosity but no fear.

A wave of movement swept the multitude. The guards became immobile, shields upraised in salute. The ponderous doors swung wide. Our black stalked forth, to gaze unwinking at the sun, yawning ostentatiously. The other they dragged abjectly to the open. The twain were yoked together and marched by men-at-arms to the foot of the further throne. To this I lifted my eyes—and saw Her, my Princess of the Pool, seated in robes of splendour ablaze with priceless jewels, a diadem on her brow, surrounded by lords and ladies, accepting graciously, but proudly as of right, the homage of her people!

Fair-skinned were those about her, with flowing tresses the colour of ripened corn—tall and imposing men; slender, graceful women. It might have been an ancient British or a Viking court. Only the attendant servitors were blacks, true children of Mother Africa, Bushmen or Hottentots. Dwarfs, all the Saan were, almost monstrosities, with hollow backs and enormous protuberant paunches. Their heads without exception lacked the kinky wool that ever marks the negro; straight hair in little isolated tufts or patches dotted their shining scalps.[5] And some there were having the heads of beasts[6]—gorilla, ape and baboon, lion and antelope, like which they moved with such mimetic art I was at first confounded. The masks they wore were fashioned with infinite care and must have been fitted with ingenious springs and wires by which ears, eyes and mouths were made to move realistically. Small wonder their cunning doctors can so delude the credulous and superstitious blacks.

[5] The physical characteristics of the but recently extinct Bushmen are indicated with curious accuracy, as confirmed by Livingstone, Barrow's "South Africa," and Baines, "Explorations."

[6] Many of the Bushman petroglyphs depict humans with antelope heads, and possibly this characteristic of Egyptian art was derived from these.

Next to the radiant Princess, one of these pigmy maskers held my gaze. There seemed about her something indefinitely familiar, yet elusive. Magician of high rank she appeared to be, for she held place of honour near the throne, plainly much favoured by her queenly mistress. The Royal One graciously bent to listen when she spoke; and then I saw the adder upon her arm; the snakeskins and the witch's pouch with which Zeete had decked herself when we set forth!

The prisoners prostrated themselves beneath the throne, while one, who must have been a scribe, for he held a scroll, seemingly read therefrom, though I heard no voice. And then, in flute-like tones, the Princess spoke, each word a pearl cast on the sea of silence:

"It is for the gods to judge; I am but mortal. If Truth ye speak, nothing have ye to fear. Into Truth's ever-living flame thy words are cast. Follow, then, to thy justification or thy doom if falsehood be on thy lips. *Tread thou the bridge!* Naught can befall thee if thy heart be clean.... I have spoken. Go!"

At once the guards sprang forward to march them back to the stations whence stretched the Spans of Justice to the Light. There for an instant they stood—the favourite of his king fearful and panic-bitten; the kaffir whom we had seized soldierly straight, facing with hopeful confidence the living fire. I watched as he set forth, intent upon his goal, and saw with horror that what I had taken for a protective handrail was an unbroken line of mighty mambas, their swaying heads, with cruelly glittering eyes, menacing every foot of the causeway's length.

Sankaeli's headman saw them even as I, and with a shriek of terror leaped to the court below, thence to plunge headlong down to the looming pit, from which almost at once came harshly chorused barking, bestially jubilant.... The kaffir, scathless, passed into the Flame!

My nerves were strained to snapping, my forehead dripping sweat. I passed my handkerchief across my face—and *all had gone!* Black night was come again. The people and the pageantry had passed. Chill winds swept the deserted

altars, but heaps of age-weathered stone, scant, stunted bushes rooted in their gaping cracks.... I was alone in that drear, haunted spot. Heralds of coming dawn showed in the eastern sky...

A touch on my shoulder, light as thistledown, caused me to quickly turn. Meisje was standing there in her beads and moocha, Zeete with her, the sorceress also as I had always known her. Words tumbled from my lips, shaping themselves as questions, whereat the Bushwoman grinned toothlessly.

"Thou must have soundly slept and the gods sent dreams," she dryly said. "Night is far spent. We must return in haste."

Silent I followed as they went down the crumbling steps.... Truly I must have dreamed? Yet impulse, like a magnet, drew me to where those other steps descended to the deeps whence rose (shrunken to a wraith of mist) the Flame of Truth... I gained the chasm's verge and gazed therein...

Far, far below stretched a dark cavern of indefinite size, to which some pallid secret fire gave scant illumination, with grotesque shifting shapes like drifting shadows, behind and around and about which on every side the murky air was alive with fireflies.... I strove to sound the shadows with my eyes, and saw that these same fireflies were in fact the teeth and eyeballs of a great company of baboons, glistening whitely in the enveloping gloom—while in the very centre of the huge hall of horrors chattering hairy brutes pushed round and round the corpse of Sankaeli's man, *impaled on a needle-sharp stalagmite!*^[7]

[7] It has been suggested that thus was first suggested this South African form of torture and death.

CHAPTER X

THE SACRAMENT OF THE SERPENT

Still in a daze, I heard Meisje's call—anxiously questioning. Where was I? Was aught amiss?

Mechanically I answered, rejoining them hurriedly. Zeete's eyes searched my face and I mumbled that I had but stopped to lace a boot.

"Hast thou, then, not yet learned that Truth were best?" she asked reproachfully.

"How can one say what is the truth and what but trickery?" I spoke my thought. My mind was in confusion. The picture of that imposing pageantry held. I knew I had not slept; it could have been no dream; and, had it been, how came the king's headman there where I had seen him plunge in his consuming terror, dead to make sport for beasts? ... There was some method in the Saab's madness! Hamlet was right: more things there are in earth and heaven than our philosophy grasps.... When Meisje spoke I started, expecting almost to see her still royally arrayed, princes and slaves about her.

"All peoples have some wisdom of their own," she gravely said. "I marvel much at the magic of thy gods."

"Nor should I have been vexed with thee," Zeete broke in contritely. "Mine was the fault, not thine. In time, if thou wilt but see, much will be plain that now is beyond thy ken."

"But that which I *did* see—this place in all its pomp—as doubtless it once was in the long ago?..."

"Thou couldst not yet understand," she interrupted. "Nor is this time or place for teaching. How did the Hyperboreans walk upon the air? How is it that in Hinde a boy climbs to the clouds by a reimpje cast upward? ... Dawn

comes. We must make haste."

That we might see how matters stood at the Hall of Paintings, we took the open trail skirting the higher cliffs, narrow and hazardous save for clambering beasts. Yet we made progress, for it was one familiar to their feet, and their indifference gave me confidence I should otherwise have lacked. Soon I, too, trod the path with unconcern, and would have it that the women fall behind till I had seen that no danger threatened. Thus it was I walked alone, the sun at its height, when I found the kaffir—or he found me.

A faint call from a near pinnacle had halted me; Zeete had spoken of watchers upon the peaks. From the scant cover of a cliffside rock I made out a moving figure that soon showed as a running black. Fast he came on to where I waited with revolver ready, but before he was yet in range his empty hands were upflung in sign of peace. His sort have the eyes of eagles. Not till he was close did I know him for our late captive.

Panting, he knelt to place my booted foot upon his head.

"How now?" I questioned. "Whither goest thou, and whence come?"

From *pezulu*^[1] he had seen us—the white inkosikaas, the witch-woman and me—treading the path of death. He came in haste as *umganaam*,^[2] for at the trail-head men lay hid to take my life and seize again the "Bride of the Sun."

[1] Above.

[2] "My friend."

But was not he himself one of them? I demanded. Had he not part in stealing the fair Princess but two sons gone? Did we not find him watching lest she escape?

Nothing did he deny. He had in truth earned death, he frankly owned. But—he did but obey. ("Orders is orders"—he had me there!) The "Glorious One" had said his was not the fault. And she had spared his life, setting his feet upon the way of Truth to Freedom—casting a spell upon the poison people so that they harmed him not!

So he had seen them, too—those writhing horrors—and doubtless all else, as I had! Though how did that shorten the road of mysteries?

He had, he said, told Sankaeli's people of what we both had seen—that dazzling court, its queenly ruler, her many slaves and giant fighting-men. These, most of all, had held his warrior eyes.... His friends, even his brothers, had forthwith drawn from him, accounting him bewitched. He went now to plead for place in the Bright One's service.

Useless to bandy words when danger pressed. I turned and back-trailed, with him trotting at my heels. His news was quickly told when we were met.

"Thou hast done well," said the Princess kindly and in her manner still was royalty. "We take thee in our service. Attend thou upon my lord"—and she smiled on me. "His word is now thy law and his life thy care!"

Zeete had gone in haste to prove his tale. It seemed that in a moment she was back. He had indeed spoken truth. The flower of Sankaeli's warriors barred our way.

"Yet, knowing where and how the trap be set, fools were we to enter it," she ended. "The path of the hidden kloof runs not far hence. We still may gain it, with favour of the gods. Masselene and I go to the lily pool, where safety lies. Stay thou somewhat behind, lest any follow. Then seek the gallery—thou knowest where. Nano will wait thee there."

A hasty word to the black and they were gone. He turned to me, his shield upon his arm, his face alight and eager.

"The trek is short, n'Koos, but let thy feet have eyes.... Perchance we may come upon them unawares?"

Truly the distance was nothing, but it was almost sheer descent, with little footing and precarious holds, the straggling clumps of stunted bush snapping at a touch or pulling out by the roots. One of those mountaineering chaps who prefer a difficult "chimney" to decent trail might have found it to his taste. I've no Alpinist blood; that sliding scramble was to me a nightmare. Luckily it was quickly over. We gained a point above the cavern's mouth whence we could see the trail like a long thin crack along the face of the kranz, appearing and disappearing as it twined and twisted crazily upward.

We made it but just in time, too, for, as we got our wind, two doll-like figures showed below, lost to sight as the path curved inward. Sankaeli's men had eyes as keen as ours; we heard their exultant shouts and saw them dash forward in swift pursuit. I counted twenty spearmen in the pack. Had we been on the trail ourselves, numbers there would have mattered little, for they needs must have come at us single file.

But they were off like eager hounds unleashed. Our only hope to head them was by taking again to the heights, trusting to find a short cut. To scale those frowning cliffs seemed sheer impossibility. Yet, clutching and clawing, slipping and sliding, on all fours like our simian ancestors, digging in with torn and bleeding fingers, hanging on by the eyelashes as it were, somehow we managed it. Just once I thought it was "Last Post" for me. If strong black fingers hadn't gripped my hair, I'd have smashed for a certainty on the rocks below.

"Good boy!" I panted, as I found fresh footing. "That was a near thing!"

He grinned good-humouredly.

"The inkosikaas gave me care of thee," he chuckled, "but thou art over-heavy long to hold."

We made our cut across as the first of their runners showed. My man was for slipping down and giving immediate battle on that thin ribbon of road. I had a better thought, as he agreed. Rocks and stones dropping from above are disconcerting and discouraging, very, especially when they come as a complete surprise. Attention for the moment shifted to us. At once they scattered. A few began to climb, seemingly with but little liking for the job. If we had had only ourselves to think of, they would have given us small concern. But even as we slipped and scrambled down, runners went bounding up the trail. Three got by for all our haste. Others followed close. The range was over-long for small arms, but, straight down and taking care not to over-shoot, I did not waste much lead. Two I saw tumble from the precipitous cliff.

My "guardian" was busy, too; he went leaping by me, his heavy assegai whizzing as he ran. Then, as a lion springs, he flung himself headlong down, to land fairly on top of one of the sweating runners. It was all of twenty feet to that narrow path! He must have knocked him breathless and before he got his wind sent him hurtling into space. How the boy saved himself from going over too, I did not see. I had my hands full dodging spears and *kerries*^[3] and potting 'em as best I could.

[3] Native fighting clubs.

A nice fast little scrap while it lasted. I've never been in a sweeter one or made better pistol practice. They had enough after a dozen or so were down, and bolted as if all the ghosts of the place were after them. I'd have followed up, but some had got by after Meisje and the old girl, before we jumped 'em. We had to let the pack go. The chaps above gave us a bit of trouble, but we saw no one till we made the trail-head.

My legs never moved so fast as on that last lap; and never has suspense so tortured me. That we raced on the thin edge of nothing never got a thought. "Will we be too late?" kept pounding in my brain. "Have they made the pool?" "Are their broken bodies somewhere at the foot of these beetling cliffs?" ... It seemed a lifetime to the last jutting turn and the hanging rock-shelf loomed overhead.... *The reim had gone! They had made it! A great weight lifted.*

Two blacks were there, and when they saw us and came towards us, to my astonishment it was with empty hands. So panic-stricken were they I could at first make nothing of their chatter. They had seen the witch-women, white and black, not far ahead—they had followed fast—and then the trail had ended blankly—the women were gone! ... The spirits must have taken them into the air, turning them into two hawks that circled near! My Man Friday, listening, was quite sure of this too.... I found it hard to keep from laughing; such "magic" even I could fathom. Still, I managed a scowl and read them a lesson for their good as I snapped them together and started them down the trail.

Good thing it was that I made them step it a few paces in the lead. Their pals were waiting to turn our own trick on us, and the very first shower of rocks from above bowled the pair over the edge. Took my cuffs with them, of course—worse luck.... Hugging the cliffside close, we were little harmed, and legged it smartly once we were clear of the gut.

As we neared the gallery each step called for greater caution. Here they could trap us neatly, themselves safe hidden. It would be pitch darkness to us, coming out of the sunlight. The secret door was set some distance in, at the very end of the ancient corridor. Until we were clear of this passage we were in constant danger. And then the door? What time would I have to puzzle out its trick? Nerve tension began to tell. I called up the black, who was lagging further and further behind. Faithful he had so far been, and a willing fighter, but would he stick? Doubtless he, too, suspected an ambush at the very gate of safety.

"The trail hereabouts is clear—no sign of a recent camp," I said to him. "How many, think you, wait in the place of pictures?"

He made no audible answer, and, though he followed, it was reluctantly. He seemed almost in a funk. So well had he acquitted himself in the up-trail scrimmage I was astonished.

"Heard you how many are in the cave?" I repeated sharply.

"None were within," he faltered. "It was the home spirits. To enter were certain death."

"Rubbish!" I broke in on his panicky plaint, hoping to rally him. "Thither we go to find life, not death. The spirit guardians protect as well as punish. Think not thou hast earned their favour? Art thou not now in the Bright One's service? Since thy blood be turned to water, go in peace to thy own place. I will tell her it was my order."

He stopped bewilderedly, as if half-minded to bolt. His eyes fixed wistfully on the distant hills. Then, shaking himself as a dog might, he strode quickly past me and down the trail.

"The inkosikaas gave thee into my care," came back to me. "I go with thee—to die!"

I've often wondered if the fellow had any premonition. I suppose it's all nonsense—must be, of course—but out in Africa you hear a lot about second sight, the prescience of those about to die, and so forth. Some creepy tales they tell! ... As usual, the unexpected happened, and my Man Friday was snuffed out before he ever discovered that he never could be one of those prancing warriors of that ghostly court—before we even had a chance to get really acquainted.

He was right about the deserted gallery. We found no ambushed foe. The bats seemed sole tenants. I kept a sharp look-out as we traversed the tomb-like passage, but saw sign of no one. He kept close at my heels, glum and silent. "Scared stiff," I thought, laughing inwardly. A bit sorry I was afterwards.

We gained the end of the sepulchral hall, but I had no need to test my wits with the puzzle of the ancient door. It swung open noiselessly, seemingly of itself. The phantom light dazzled as instantly it closed behind me, but not before my ears were stunned by the mingled sounds of some heavy object falling with a thunderous crash, a single muffled groan abruptly cut off, and the excited growling of a near baboon.

You can teach the monkey folk a lot more than most people imagine, but you can't teach them to use brains they aren't possessed of. And you can't get out of their heads, off-hand, ideas that have been planted and cultivated, patiently and painstakingly, for weeks and months and even years. Old Nano, like the rest, had a baboon's single-track mind. He had been taught the gallery was tabu to all blacks. He knew this particular chap for one of the gang that had seized his white mistress; and, seeing him following me, not unnaturally he jumped to the conclusion that he was an enemy, to be dealt

with summarily.

So he had let fall a great block of stone from the vaulted roof. It was tons in weight and, dropped from twelve feet above fairly on the poor wretch, flattened him like a pancake. It must have been instantaneous; he never knew what happened. Something like putting one's foot on an insect in one's path.

But his idea was right! ... There was one Sankaeli man I take off my hat to. He knew that to enter the cave of the spirits meant death to him, yet he went straight ahead, eyes front, to meet his doom man-fashion.... Also he had fought by my side—and saved my life.

Luckily for Nano, he had scurried away. Later on, when I had cooled down a bit, I could see he wasn't to blame; he had done his duty as he understood it. But right then I was mad enough to have potted him. He knew I had it in for him, though why no doubt puzzled him, and made off at a pace I wouldn't have tried to follow. I was left alone in that awesome corridor of amber light by which Zeete had led me to the vast empty hall of audience with its great bronze chair. I had no fancy again to visit the dispiriting place; yet less was I inclined to venture any of the unfamiliar passages. Remembrance lingered of the musty crypt where we had found the two prisoners and their serpent keepers.

The sorceress and my Princess I supposed still at the pool, waiting opportunity to regain the cavern palace. I would have retraced my steps, counting to meet them upon the trail, but, contriving to swing again the massive door, I found the way was blocked. The fallen stone so filled the narrow passage that to go round or over it was alike impossible. Tug and strain as I would, using such leverage as at hand, brought not the least result. One might as well have sought to shift the mountain. I was securely penned in that dismal place, perhaps to stay there till I starved. Of that sweet prospect I did not think so much as that my Little Flower and her grotesque guardian would soon be there, to find retreat cut off.

Again and again I attacked that obstinate boulder, to no effect. Resting for a fresh assault and trying to think of some effective plan, it struck me that, after all, the case might not be so desperate: the baboon had not come back; therefore he had gone somewhere. Those hills were honeycombed with caves and tunnels; obviously, then, there were other exits and entrances. Zeete would know of them? My course was to stand by until they came, hoping it would not be with Sankaeli's men recovered from their panic and at their heels. Nothing to be gained by losing my head! I got my pipe going and sat down to wait.

It was utterly still but for the faint tinkle of water dripping in some sable cross-cut. Details of the luminous walls that before had escaped me began subconsciously to register. There seemed all along the smooth surface a shadowy pattern or design of interwoven circles, crosses, and triangles, suggesting a mural inscription more ancient but somewhat similar to those on so many Indian gates and doorways. Possibilities of hidden messages from the far-away past excited the imagination. Puzzling on these, for the moment I forgot my luckless plight. Time passed; I know not how long. In the excitement I had forgotten to wind my watch. Night and day were one in that still aisle of the unearthly light. I began to feel stiff and cramped—started pacing back and forth to restore circulation. Thus, coming to the end of my short beat, I was about to turn, when voices reached me as through thick walls, unrecognisable, so faint they were.

Quickly I strode on to where the luminous hallway gave on the lofty court. Its yawning emptiness seemed all unbroken, but as I sought to sound its farther shadows, my eyes caught a transient movement at the very foot of the grim throne, and then I saw that a tiny door stood open in the base of the daïs itself, with two figures, diminutive at the distance, halted there in conference. It could be none but them! Even as I started towards them, they moved in my direction, Meisje hailing me joyously. In my delight to know her safe, I quite forgot to ask how they had come there.

A flying moment only we had together, for Zeete urged the need of haste, and without further word led back through a narrow shaft sharply inclining downward from beneath the throne to where, amid the luxurious trappings of forgotten kings, she had made her home through the many years. Nor even then would she give us even a little time for one another. Our respite would be brief, she gloomily predicted. Evening now melted into night. By morning Sankaeli's people once more would be in pursuit.

"Before the new day is born thou must be hence," she insisted, "and I be left alone, with empty heart."

That she go, too, she would not at all consider.

"This is the place of my people. Here I have lived my life. Here will I leave my bones.... Also seeing me, they will think perchance that the Princess carries with me, and thus will thy chance be bettered," she reasoned logically. "I have as well a score to settle with this upstart king that sets his dogs upon us."

It would be a hard run for the mare, bearing double, but I could count on my Jean, I thought with pride.

"Nay, thou must have a second horse," the reader of minds maintained. "The trek is long and their runners swift. Nor will they follow the beaten track, thus saving themselves miles; whilst thou canst not press forward as thou wouldst if thou wert alone. She has never ridden horse. It will try her sorely.... Take with thee food against needs by the way. Masselene will make it ready. I go to seek a horse." She chuckled audibly.

"What is the jest?" I asked. "The prospect to me holds little humour."

"I thought to find a horse at the hidden stead," she answered. "The farmer surely can spare one to dower a neighbour maid?"

I laughed with her, while Meisje looked her bewilderment as she sped to make her scant preparation—but to return as soon as the crone had gone.

"What jest had grand-dame that might not be shared with me?" she questioned in woman's way. "I have no secrets that are not my lord's."

"Where, then, hidest thou from me at the lily pool?" I asked in turn, minded to tease.

"There is no time to tell," she answered, blushing. "Soon of a surety thou shalt know all, but the tale is over-long _____"

"And thou shalt have mine in turn," I assured her. "For that, too, is no short story, and it concerns thee much."

Plainly perplexed, she gazed into my eyes. Then her arms went about my neck and her lips claimed mine.

"We have so much to tell to one another," she murmured. "I would have naught hid from thee in my whole life—an I not thy wife?"

"Thou surely wilt be, precious, so soon as we can find a parson," I told her, whereon she must ply me anew with whys and wherefores. All strange and curious to her were our artificial ceremonies.

"Much foolishness it seemeth," she pouted prettily. "But since these are thy customs, I am content." In a flash, her mood changing, she added contradictorily: "But we of the Ancient Wisdom had marriage rites as well, though they be now long disused! It pleaseth me to go with thee wedded! Also it better suits the habit of thy people. Thou wilt not deny me this? But a few short minutes—and it would so please grand-dame!"

I certainly saw no reason to refuse. One extra marriage, to bind her the closer to me? I nodded ready agreement and again her lips sought mine.

"I go, then, to make ready," she exclaimed, blue eyes dancing. "What shall I wear? The beads thou hast not yet seen?—and must I indeed cut off all my hair?"^[4]

[4] A marriage custom of certain of the tribes.

The question was panicky. No such custom held among civilized peoples, I assured her. A woman's hair was counted her crowning glory.

"They *have*, then, some wisdom," she chirruped happily. "I grow to think more highly of their ways."

She fluttered away, laughingly elusive when I would have claimed a fresh caress.

"Nay, no more now," she ruled with sweet seriousness—"not till we plight our vows. Thou wilt have long with me to feast thyself."

I saw no more of her till Zeete returned, successful as a horse thief. Nano came creeping in, and, seeing me, bolted precipitately. I ate a little—smoked many pipes—dozed fitfully, for I was very weary. Time and again I called, but She did not come. Twice I heard her laughing merrily, mockingly. And once her voice came to me faintly, whence I could not tell:

"Thou must learn patience! All husbands have need of it"—and again her laughter rang out like silver bells.

A chuckle came from a far corner where Zeete had squatted to busy herself with a tiny phial and an earthen bowl. This she set down to take from a bamboo tube a handful of small reed arrows, each in its turn to be critically examined. Was it quite straight? And sound? And rightly balanced? Some she cast aside; others were piled by the bowl. Curiosity drew me to her. She grinned up over a shrunken shoulder.

"Masselene shoots well," said she. "These are for her to take."

"Not much use against bullets," I laughed, picking up one of the toy missiles. "Doth she make war, then, on the small birds alone?"

"Thy lead were the less deadly when I have done with them," she answered grimly, dipping an arrow's tip and laying it carefully aside. It dried at once—a stain of rusty brown no bigger than a pin-point.

"What is the stuff?" I asked. The Bushmen, I knew, were accounted adept poisoners.

"This witch's brew," said she, "the blacks know it as the 'Seed of Death.' Sometimes the venom of snakes serves well. Others will use that of the spinner of webs; it is more sure but harder to come at. But best is this of mine, which never fails and works with thought's speed. For each small drop N'gwa gives his life, but in that drop is death for ten strong men.... Beware the strength of the weak."^[5]

[5] One of the favourite Bushman poisons was the venom of a spider of the genus *Mygale*; another, for which no antidote was known, exceptionally deadly, was made from the entrails of the caterpillar N'gwa.

N'gwa, the caterpillar, a master poison-carrier! That lowly crawling thing that every day is trodden underfoot without a thought! It seemed incredible, but later I proved it truth.

Meisje dancing in ended my education in the poisoner's art. She blew me an airy kiss and forthwith threw her arms about the withered dame, stooping to whisper confidences the pith of which I guessed. Zeete appeared at first bewildered; then, grinning broadly, she scrambled to her feet, her bowl and sheaf of deadly arrows carefully cherished. My Princess pirouetting daintily ahead, they vanished behind the peacock portières, whence came a steady flow of excited whispering and then long silence. I had begun to wonder what had become of them when the witch materialized from the cell-like shrine wherein that hideous idol sat enthroned.

"Our Princess saith thou art minded to wed after the manner of our people?" she stated questioningly, her marked complacency betokening her delight. "It pleaseth me that thou wouldst have it so, nor need precious time be lost. Our rites were few and simple, even for the royal house, yet lacking not force and meaning, nor lightly to be forgotten.... Time was when I myself thought much upon them—when Spring's wine flowed warm in my veins and one there was..."

A trembling skeleton hand was lifted to brush unshed tears from the faded eyes; the bloodless lips quivered

tremulously. Knowing not what to say, I patted clumsily a parchment-like shoulder that shortly ceased to tremble.

"So long, long ago, yet it seemeth but yesterday, for all the lonely years," came in a choking whisper.... She bravely pushed her memories aside.

"Marriage!" she mused—"the fusing of two creative forces—merging of souls and bodies, thoughts, interests, joys, sorrows, ambitions! How wonderful it is, this basic institution of the all-wise gods! Not for a day, a year, but all of life. Once bound, the golden fetters may not be broken or cast off. Search, then, thy heart and mind, lest regret be born too late."

Her earnest gravity checked light rejoinder. After all, marriage is still a serious and lasting business among some savage peoples. I did a quick bit of serious thinking and felt the better.

"My mind is fixed," I told her soberly. "The maid holds all my heart and I would wed, to care for and cherish her."

A moment her sunken eyes searched mine, seeming to sound my soul, and then a skinny hand was outthrust, English fashion, to clasp mine.

"Truth is in thy heart," she said simply. "It pleaseth me well. To none but thee would I trust my jewel, but her happiness and her life already are in thy hands. Come, then. Thy bride waits."

"Thine will be such a marriage as never have these musty courts looked down on," she murmured, as we passed from the palace chamber. "An alien lord, a Princess by adoption and by deceit—no dancers, no musicians, no wedding feast, no offerings, no priest—a virgin witch, the agent of the high gods! Thou art not like to forget!"

We were now in the shadow of the misshapen idol, towards which I glanced with casual contempt. I wondered that one with such proved sense still could give credence to pagan frauds.

"'Tis what is symbolized, not the insensate wood, or stone, or gold, or form, or fittings," she answered unvoiced thought. "Hast in thy temples naught so meant? ... The Serpent with us of ancient days typifies Wisdom——"

She stopped abruptly, seeing I gave scant heed. I looked for Meisje, but she was not there.

"It is our heathen custom," Zeete smiled, "that the man await the woman. Short will thy waiting be. I hear her now."

Ethereal music, a mere melodic whisper, filled the gloomy court. With hurried injunction that I await her further word, Zeete was gone again, to reappear almost instantly, decked in the fantastic trappings of her occult trade and take her priestess's place before the brooding effigy. She signed to me to stand facing her and at her right hand; and, as I moved to do so, the portières parted and my love appeared, dancing, not walking—dancing as might a fairy, her little feet twinkling all soundlessly, her arms, her fingers, her swaying slender form in rhythmic unison to make perfect just such a poem of movement as once, and only once, had been unfolded before my eyes—that mad night of phantom pageantry in the reincarnated amphitheatre.

I gazed entranced, enchanted, the while she made with unstudied fluid grace a single circuit of the tiny room and sank, as might a snowflake, at the witch's feet, her fair head bowed to her maiden breast. Her unbound tresses made for her a crown of shimmering gold, and on her neck and shoulders was that which made me gasp in stark amaze—a necklace of dull whitish pebbles tied to a strip of sinew. Fully a hundred stones; and, though I am all unlearned in lapidary's lore, I knew them for uncut diamonds worth a monarch's ransom.

Slowly she rose, to stand demurely before her foster-mother at my side. Her hand crept shyly into mine. Zeete's leathery palm fell on both. Her piping voice was lifted in ceremonial chant.

"... Giving each, himself and herself, completely to the other, in soul and body as in wealth or want, in sickness or in health, in Sun or shadow, in singleness of thought and act and mind till they shall answer the call of the Lords of Rest," I heard as in a dream; "let, then, the god of Wisdom bind and guide them!"

I started at a cold and clammy touch upon my wrist; and, glancing down, felt the prickling hair rise on my scalp in horror; the adder that had coiled somnolent about the pigmy's arm had, as she spoke, slipped down, and now twined itself round our two hands, the hard, unwinking eyes glittering, blackly malevolent, in the swaying head.

Move I dare not. Fear held me paralysed, yet not for my own safety but for Her. Stealthily, slowly, my left hand moved upwards. I thought to snatch away the waving terror, though it meant speedy death... My bride's voice checked me, steady and soft and sweet:

"Nay, it will harm not, my husband and my lord. 'Tis but the test of Truth, menacing none whose hearts' be free of guile. See, even now its little part is done"—and as she spoke the reptile again entwined itself on Zeete's offered arm.

"Salute thy happy wife!"

CHAPTER XI

AN UNSEEN SWORD FALLS

Such was our marriage. Of that which followed, memory is a blur. Late in the afternoon we stole forth cautiously to reconnoitre. From the high cliff above, we looked down on the stead, to see Gentil's people moving about in panicky disorder, with no sign of the master. Sankaeli's men stalked truculently everywhere, the timorous field folk and herders shrinking from them in obvious fear. And as we watched, horses and flocks were gathered and driven forth.

Look where we might, black spearmen seemed everywhere—strung out along the track—watching upon the heights—mustered in strengthened force below the gallery. And all were decked for war, confirming, to my dismay, what we had heard of the countryside in arms. No doubt remained, the situation was serious indeed. To make the Post would now be difficult, nor was I over sure of the Post itself. Likely we should have to abandon it for a time; and past all question it was no place for Her with the war drums booming.

My better plan, I judged, would be to strike forthwith for Pandaasburg, or, rather, its nearest outpost, fifty odd miles away across the river. The natives would count on my heading south-east for Olifantsfontein, and would distribute themselves to cut us off. Olifantsfontein track, as I knew it, was hard and tortuous, with two bad rivers to swim, lacking safe drifts.^[1] I might have chanced it myself, but dared not with a life to guard more precious than my own.

^[1] Ford.

We slipped away, so soon as night had settled, by the secret trail. There Zeete had hidden the horses so cleverly I would have passed them by. The beast she had commandeered in our need was steady and tractable, with plenty of bone and muscle for a long, hard grind, and an easy gait—a trippler country-bred. She had brought it saddled and bridled, but we took off and cached the saddle. Meisje foresaw it would be too hard for her. Also she doubted her skill and strength for management of the beast, so that I thought it best to unbuckle one end of the rein and lead for a while at least. We mounted by the great rock where the little spruit made its music in the darkness, and there we took leave of Zeete, a wraith-like shadow in the enveloping gloom. She was to play her part in striving to lull suspicion that the maid had flown.

To strike the Pandaasburg track we had perforce to skirt Sankaeli's kraal. Here was active danger. Happily the track was a bit sunken and the mealies alongside grown high. The horses behaved well, too, as, having muffled them, I led past in terror of chance discovery. Once a dog barked challenge, and I thought luck had deserted us. We halted, and Meisje

sprang lightly down and for an instant clung to me, then busied herself watching and listening, her sheaf of arrows ready, the while I scouted and thereafter breathed more freely. There was a big *twala*^[2] drink on and it held attention. We safely passed and soon were cantering forward, doing a steady eight miles, or even better. My spirits rose with dawn's coming. At least we had won the start.

[2] Native beer.

Morning had an hour come before I thought it safe to halt. We had rounded the base of Sankaeli's mountain and were skirting the low plateau from which it springs. Thunder was in the air, with signs of storm; occasional angry rumblings echoed from the high hills, answering the unbroken roll of the calling drums. The track led on through a minor kloof fairly thick with *wacht-en-beetje* that gave welcome cover, while the shrunken watercourse still held sufficient for our needs. Here I off-saddled, knee-haltered our beasts, and left them to rest and graze such time as we dared spare.

Meisje was a bit stiff, but still smiling. Never was there another such woman! Resourceful, calm, quick-witted, knowledgful, ready to face all dangers clear-eyed and unafraid! She had come through like a brick, never once complaining, happy as a lark. Not that she didn't sense as well as I the tight squeeze we were in; but, as she said, we were in it together, and moping or worrying wouldn't better matters. While I looked after the horses she busied herself domestically, as if she were in her own kitchen in a land of peace, humming softly as she flitted forth and back between the spruit and a flat-topped rock she had elected table. And soon she called me to breakfast—our wedding breakfast!

Not much of a feast, yet to me it was nectar and ambrosia. I fancied her sitting opposite me at a real table, white cloth and everything, pouring the coffee and sweetening it with her smiles. *Biltong* there was, a few hard biscuits, some young green mealies and prickly pear. She had made of the pear a very tasty dish, taking branches and rubbing the prickles off in the running water. I'd never have thought of that. It's a native trick. And in place of coffee we had, mixed with clear water, a marvellously heartening cordial of the witch's brewing, stimulating and delicious.

Womanlike, she must afterwards tidy up the place as Nature had it. There were no dishes to be washed and put away, which seemed unfair. Every real woman is born a housewife. We were on the road again before the sun was high, and I was just beginning to feel a bit easier, for thus far we had seen no one, when far to the left and behind flashed a danger signal. It came and went, a glint of bluish light showing fitfully against the mountain's shadow. Thus do assegais flash when the sun strikes on them.

That was what it was—moving spearmen—and we pushed forward at the best pace her mount could make for upwards of an hour. It must have been cruelly hard for her, but she gave no sign. Then we stopped on a little bush-screened rise and had a careful look round. The blacks were in plain sight, twenty, if not more, still a long way back of us, but unpleasantly closer than when we had spotted them. Great runners they are—can go all day long, even wearing down a good horse if they set themselves to it. They must have picked up our spoor in the early morning and come right along after us.

We kept going. There was nothing else to do. The sun poured hotly down, flooding the veldt with scorching waves. Our borrowed horse had been grass-fed and showed growing distress; even Jean was in a lather. The grind had been hard and steady, for we had put a good sixty miles behind us. God, how she must have suffered, and yet she could smile!

Collapse came suddenly. The lead-rein jerked and her beast stumbled to its knees. Turning, I saw her swaying silently, and, to save herself, fall limply forward, clutching about his neck. I was at once beside her, lifting her down. Wanly she shook her head.

"It may not be, my husband," she faltered. "I thought myself so strong, yet I am weak. Truly I am spent and can go no farther. Leave me, then, here, nor tarry.... Yea, but thou must go on...."

I would not harken, but bore her, bravely protesting, to where a clump of thorn offered a little shade. Much did I reproach myself that, knowing little of women, I had so over-tried her strength.

"Nay, it was indeed my fault only," she insisted. "Nor will I let thee stay. As thou loveth me, press on quickly; it is thy duty. What we have learned thy chiefs must know forthwith. Else many die perchance who might be saved. I would not have my lord forget his honour."

Was ever man so tried? There was, I knew, though I denied it fiercely, much in her argument, yet could I not bear to think. I would not leave here there—I could not! And when she pleaded my duty against my will, pictured the horrors of honest farmer folk butchered who might be saved, boasted how she would contrive again to break free of the old king's clutches if worst befell, I thought I should indeed go mad.

And all the while Sankaeli's pack were closing the gap of miles.

She saw at length my mind would not be changed, and instantly sought then to justify my course.

"'Tis not that thou loveth me and I am thy wife," she said, "but that I am helpless woman in thy care!"

That I could save her when they should overhaul us was but a forlorn hope. That death should not part us rather was in my mind. But I would fight it out!

Time offered for me at least to pick my ground. Near was the very place for a good last stand, on a gentle rise giving an ideal line of fire. Here, with any sort of luck, I could hold them off till night, when I must be surrounded and the end come quickly. This I made cruelly clear. She took it like a soldier.

"Indeed, naught shall part us, lord," she said, and still she smiled. "Shouldst thou fall, I will not be taken. Quickly I will come to thee. The understanding gods will surely forgive."

Nothing would do but she should help me while I threw up a little schans. Pitifully weak it was, but the best we could manage. We both were the better for work's distraction. Then, pacing off distances, I set out small whitish stones to mark my ranges, and fitted a useful rest for my service rifle. All was done I could think to do. We sat down to await what might be. Somehow I felt grimly content. I should at least die fighting, and I was a good shot and knew I could get half a dozen of them with any sort of luck, which was a crumb of comfort.

Nothing so horribly tries tense nerves as doing nothing—just waiting. Nothing is harder to bear when one is all keyed up. Even if we had but a few more short hours for each other and life, the minutes dragged. The Sankaelis didn't come. At the speed they'd been making, half an hour from where we had last caught sight of them should have brought them, swarming like hornets, round us. The half-hour passed. No sound of humankind merged with the myriad little voices of the veldt. A venturesome meerkat^[3] slipped from beneath a rock and stared questioningly, one forefoot lifted, poised for instant retreat. An eagle circled lazily in the brassy sky on his everlasting watch. A pair of timid oribi^[4] drifted across the field of sight.

^[3] A small animal of the mongoose sort.

^[4] A small antelope.

I could stand inaction no longer. A minor rise of land cut off for a mile or two the track over which we had stormed. I risked leaving my frail Gibraltar and (Meisje with me) climbed a big rock that offered better vantage. We could scarcely believe our eyes: *the Amaxosas were trekking homeward—pursuit given over!*

I scarcely knew which was stronger, our perplexity or relief. It's quite a let-down to get all set for the heroic and nothing come off. We couldn't understand. Months after, the riddle was read for me: Bambata's men had talked pretty straight to the old king. They didn't want any man-power wasted in chasing after a mere woman just at that time; and I fancy old Zeete and her protégée may have had rather more prestige down in Zululand than Sankaeli imagined. At any rate, he had sent out fast runners to call off his dogs.

We rested almost with easy minds through the balance of the blissful afternoon, and got going again, at the walk, in the early evening, keeping a sharp lookout but seeing no one. All that night we pushed on, the track in places wide enough for me to ride alongside and talk with my tired wife. She needed no cheering up. We both were very happy and confident. Time raced as we talked—made scores of different plans for what we dreamed was to be the future. The late rising moon found us within the loom of the mountains, and dawn was in the sky when we reached the river and I knew we must be nearing the first of the Pandaasburg posts.

The trail had narrowed again and I was leading, jogging along contentedly, when it happened: something stirred in the long grass, perhaps a lion, I thought. The startled horses shied different ways. I had tied the lead-rein to my arm and was jerked from the saddle, my foot catching in the stirrup. Jean may have dragged me, though it's hard for me to think it. I don't know. My head got it, and got it badly, and I lost consciousness....

When I came to it was full day. I was alone. My head was splitting and every bone in my body seemed to be broken, although it was only my ankle. My rifle was gone. The stirrup-leather had pulled out of the saddle—that must have taken some strain. The horses had disappeared. *MEISJE WAS GONE!*

CHAPTER XII

DOWN TO THE DEPTHS

Once more the sun peeped over the mountain wall at the awakened veldtland. The thin mists of early morning billowed and rolled and melted into the crystal air. Bushbuck and reitbuck^[1] performed their morning pilgrimage, quenched their thirst at the river, stood statue-still on its bank to look the country over and find it good—then, one by one, turned to their runs, seeking the cool of shady hollows and the day's repose: always those four stiff-legged walking steps and then, lightly and fleetly, away in effortless bounds. In the vlei^[2] a flock of great blue cranes challenged proprietorship with the solemn secretary birds, importantly busy in their quest of snakes to justify the faith of a favouring government.^[3] Nearer, in the bushed flat, buck pheasants crowed shrilly; while scream of guinea-fowl and whir of partridge swelled the matutinal anthem. It was a typical springtime morning—yet all the world had changed.

[1] A small red deer.

[2] Marshland.

[3] The secretary bird as a snake-eater is protected.

I found myself by the track when consciousness returned with torment of thought. To move was agony, my left leg useless. My clothing was torn and caked with blood and dirt. I dragged myself to a near rise in the deserted track, whence I looked long and anxiously for sign of Meisje, calling to her and Jean till my strength was spent. Not even echo answered, and the pain grew apace, so that I felt myself faint.

It was then, searching the river's course with aching eyes, I saw in the morn's cool light on the further bank a fluttering flag, and knew it to mark a Post of our police! Did ever so cruel irony mock a despairing man? Here we had been in sight of friends and safety when adverse Fate stretched forth its hand to snatch my treasure from me and strike me down!

To gain the Post and help was now my goal. To take stock of my damage was first demanded. The ankle was the worst, I quickly found; beyond doubt it was broken, and very badly—a compound fracture, the splintered bone protruding from the torn and fevered flesh. Whisper of running water reached me from not far distant, and toward it I

dragged myself inch by inch until, after what seemed hours' travail, I gained the trickling spruit, in whose chill waters I held my burning foot until the agony was somewhat eased and the swelling much reduced.

Long I drank of the grateful water, too, and then began toilsome effort to reach the river. I could not stand. Fever ran hot within me. My mind was in confusion and all things swam and danced before my eyes. Yet I made laggard progress, with frequent stops to catch my failing breath. Nettles buffeted my face. The long grass cut my hands; and more than once I halted in expectancy of death, as snakes drew threatening from my course.

One of these, a mamba of great length—it must have measured full seven feet from evil head to tip of tail—stood ground and fixed me with its baleful glare, the while the wicked head swayed menacingly. It had been stretched, full fed, beside its wanton kill, a hapless dassie, the hair of which came out in handfuls when I touched it, by which I knew it poisoned through and through.[4] The breeding season had passed, else I had surely been as that luckless rabbit.[5]

[4] When an animal dies of snakebite its hair can be very easily plucked out.

[5] The mamba is said to attack man unprovokedly only during the breeding season.

Had it not been downward going, I never should have made it, but by luck's chance I gained the river—a swiftly-flowing torrent that must after the rains have swept the valley as a wall of water. Too swift for crocodiles, lingering reason told me, and such a stream as to be crossed by none in time of flood.

My watch showed five o'clock when, torn and spent, at last I gained the water and once more drank deep. Again and again I shouted, but got no answer. That dear familiar flag fluttered maddeningly over silent huts that seemed untenanted, and not a wisp of smoke rose in the wind-washed air. An hour passed, and yet another. My throat was parched and sore with futile calling.... The watch said 7.30 before any movement showed on the further shore. A man stepped from the hut and stood idly gazing toward the distant hills. Desperately I called. He turned and sauntered leisurely towards the mess and coffee. That I had not been heard was all too plain.

My strength was gone: I knew death very near. Yet I *must* live to set them upon her spoor. I rallied to my cause the last reserves of mind and will. Matches I had, and the high grass was dry and plentiful. With shaking, swollen hands I fired it. Smoke eddied round me in a choking cloud. I strained my eyes to watch, but none had seen....

An age in truth it seemed, in which hope fled, when they came down to the stream to water the horses. I yelled as best I could, and one halted and stood looking towards me, listening. Then with his beast he swam the river, and I knew help came at last....

He found me unconscious, and, as he thought, dead. I know nothing of how they took me across, or of what befell later, save "from information received." I had a rather bad go with the fever, I judge—*Malaria ferox*—in which I raved my head off. They must have put two and two together and guessed that some girl was lost. On that long chance they made search for her, following back my spoor to where I'd been thrown; and there all about were footprints, not mine at all! Gentil's horse they found miles away, on the home track, with a sprained fetlock joint. Jean had made her way back to the Post in sorry shape.

They were stumped, and owned it—couldn't do a thing more till my wits came back to me, and that wasn't for weeks. When I did manage to tell my story, their hands were so full with duty they could do little more. "Hope for the best" was all they could say to me—perhaps she had managed to get back to her home in the caves and was hiding up. She at least knew the country and the native ways. "Not as though she was *white*!" That made me fume. They thought sickness had turned my head!

As soon as I was strong enough I rode back to the old Post. They had got word to our chaps where I was and the shape I was in, and the O.C. was uncommonly decent: passed the word for me to take it easy, sent along some magazines, and said he'd look me up as soon as he could get round to it. But all that didn't help my trouble; he wouldn't give me the

leave I wanted, with things as they were in the district and Bambata on the rampage. Can't say I could fairly blame him; he'd gassed with the Pandaasburg detail and got their version—and I hadn't said a word to my own outfit as to any white girl, which made my tale sound fishy. So they wagged their silly heads and whispered, "Poor fellow! Fever!" till I thought I'd go mad.

Many a day I spent prowling about her hills and our trysting-pool—haunting the deserted stead. Gentil had vanished about the same time the trouble with the blacks blew up, and his people scattered. I thought they would have gone back to their Chief, but Sankaeli swore he'd seen nothing of them or the farmer either. There were horses in his kraal at the time that I knew precious well were Gentil's; but I couldn't prove it. And as for a White Witch living with the spirit people—he had never seen one. "Just talk," the stories some of his people had told of her. "They must have seen one of the ghost people." Zeete had gone as well; I could get no word of her. And the gallery of the paintings was, when I visited it, given over to the bats and birds. The ancient door at its end seemed sealed by time. I could not make it open.

I had no excuses for further loafing and work would be some occupation for my troubled mind, so back to duty I went—wanted to stick around there whatever happened. We were short-handed as usual, and in saddle most of the time, for the trouble wasn't over and our blacks were out to help the Zulus all they could and not get their own fingers burnt. Then one day we got the good news that the Zulu had been properly smashed and Bambata's head stuck on a pole at the gates of his principal village. Things quieted down then even sooner than we thought....

I had just got in from one of my fruitless circling rides over the hills and was sitting on the low stoep in the dying afternoon, staring with aching eyes at nothing. My rifle lay across my knees, its worn and shiny bands strangely soft to the touch. Our pet baboon scabbled its hands in the hard dust in that rasping, half-human way they have. I had semi-consciously been sighting at the beast as I'd often done before, but with little interest any longer in its instant dodge behind the tree. Its half-intelligence seemed an affront. I hated all things.

Some of our native police boys came through the thorn trees with a prisoner, and my gorge rose as I made out the beast for a type I'd been over-familiar with—a mine coolie, and by his looks one of the worst. The foul face with the rheumy slits of eyes and the dirty yellow-black skin, the festering mouth, the mangy tufted scrub that covered his once-shaven head—and, well I knew before I got a whiff of it, the abominable smell of him!

I looked away in disgust while the kaffir sergeant droned out his "rap-port."

He had gone on patrol as ordered. He had visited this kraal and that kaffir stad.^[6] He had dug out this prisoner from the brush near Sankaeli's old kraal——

^[6] Small holding.

At that I looked sharply round, catching my breath. A cold hand seemed at my throat. My ears hummed. I turned my gaze on the Chinese, taking in each detail—his filthy face, the yellow rheum at the corners of his slant eyes, a scratch on his flat nose, his ragged blue blouse, his sturdy, misshapen legs. He had made himself sandals of a sort—native foot bandages, rather. A bit of duck was wound about his right foot. I glanced at the other. It was tied up in the hide of a Marbled Cat!

I didn't think at all. My rifle cracked and he fell forward on his face, dead as a herring. They said the bullet drilled clean through his heart.

* * * * *

Well, they made me a prisoner and took away my gun. Poor old Pete was detailed to take me in to headquarters, a job he didn't much relish. We started next day, after saying good-bye to the boys everyone trying to look as if nothing had happened. Old John started to give me some message for his canteen sergeant, but bit it off and took to cursing a police-boy for some purely imaginary delinquency. It was deuced uncomfortable. I was glad when we got under way.

It was like going off on patrol together, and yet in little things it wasn't—my empty rifle-bucket flapping against my mare's side when she cantered—the feeling that I was looking on each new prospect for the last time—poor Pete's uncommon generosity with "the makin's." We kept starting talks that trailed off into nothing—the locust swarm three miles thick on the Crocodile Valley—the wild dogs that were killing off the game at Olifantsburg—how long the Government would allow our fellows to be taken hunting for Kruger's gold in the bad season that killed off so many—whether we'd all be kicked out when the new Boer Government got in swing.... I tried to keep up my end, but my head felt numb.

We crossed the Steelpoort at the familiar drift, taking the horses fifty yards upstream to allow for the racing current. The old native living there took our clothing across on his head, smacking the water to scare off the crocs.; and we followed, towing our beasts. A dangerous river, the Steelpoort! Once swept past the landing-place—good-night!

It was while we were dressing again the thought struck me, why hadn't I gone down? One strong pull at the lead-rein would have done the trick! It would have checked the mare for the instant and we should have been swept away together past the tangled roots of the trees, under the overhanging branches, into that tunnel of shade and endless quiet!

What had I to live for? The thought grew on me as we remounted and set out. Why hadn't I, when I had the chance? But perhaps there'd be another? I must think—think! For the first time that day my brain cleared. I had something to plan—something to do. How could I do it? I was unarmed, of course; even the tiny pistol some of us carried in native country for reasons of our own had been deftly abstracted from my clothes the night before.

My eyes searched the countryside—Pete and his horse. His rifle? Could I snatch it? No, he had a good grip and the sling was on his arm. Besides, unless you rig a loop of string to the trigger and work it with your toe, you can't do much damage to yourself with the old long rifle.... Should I make a break for it? And would Pete shoot if I did? Yes, I decided, he probably would—but he'd miss, or merely wound me. I must have something more certain.

If I'd seen a mamba by the trackside I'd have thrown myself off and on top of it. I had seen one last not far from there. I remembered how I had tantalized it with a whip, and when it went for me I'd kept Jean cantering in front of it to see how fast it really could move—a boy's trick. Suppose she'd put her foot in a hole? As it was, it nearly got me, for we had suddenly found ourselves on a promontory, the ground falling away sharply in a great cliff where the Steelpoort makes a huge curve in toward the road again—an awful place. I had to pretty near jump that snake to get back!

A great cliff, yes! Suppose ... I had it! That cliff! One last hard gallop, the wind singing in our ears, and then—Wouldn't old Pete be surprised! That was all I thought right then. I grew almost cheerful. How pleased the old lad was! He laughed and joked, starting in to tell me his worn-out tale about somebody who had all but lost his trousers getting through a wire fence. I kept laughing, for I could see the place we were nearing was the very spot where I'd teased my mamba. Away to the right the ground rose in a gentle swell, and I knew what lay beyond the crest, it might be a mile away!

I stiffened ever so slightly in the saddle and rubbed my calf on the mare's barrel. Instantly she broke into her long, even walk—then shortened her stride, gave her head a toss, mouthed her bit. The little Basuto ears began to twitch—flashed back and forth. Not yet, old girl, not yet! ... In a moment or two!

We came to the place. I kept talking all the time. Then I leaned forward and closed my legs.... You had to know Jean to ride her. She leaped straight in air—one small bound and then a huge one, like an antelope. I used to like it, but then I knew her ways. She did it to get her pace up. And she certainly could get off the mark in a hurry!

As I swung off the track I heard Pete's startled shout and the thud of his leggings on his saddle-flaps. Poor old Pete! As if his beast could catch my Jean! Couldn't she move! The veldt streaked by in a green and yellow line. I leaned forward and yelled exultantly, but I couldn't even hear myself. My voice was caught and swept back as we flew on. Then the near skyline flashed down past the opposite mountains and I went down with a bump and a wrench that ought to have broken Jean's back but didn't—and found myself still sitting her as she clawed desperately back to safety. I could have thrown myself over then, but my muscles seemed to do mechanically what my mind didn't want them to. Next minute I was watching Pete's roan come up the rise, old Pete with his elbows stuck out and his hat gone to glory—Jean shaking under me, her lean head moving from side to side as she swung it to take stock of the fool on her back, first one eye, then

the other.

And then I felt mightily ashamed, for it came over me, seeing Pete's anxious face, how I'd tried to let him down. Had I gone over, his chances of promotion were scotched for good, and well I knew it. Scarth was a just man, and kindly; he might even have sympathised with him in his heart, but then—Pete would have been finished!

He had a perfect right to handcuff me, or change horses, but he didn't. We pushed on.

When we got to the dorp^[7] I was handed over to the town police. The sight of the blue uniforms with the numbers on the collars made me feel indeed a criminal. I was put in a tent and guarded night and day, some of my own friends having to do this duty. I was examined by doctors. I was questioned and questioned again. Then I was tried. I had a clever lawyer. Evidence was given that I had had a bad fall, followed by fever, since which I had been acting queerly. They brought in a manslaughter verdict, with a recommendation to mercy. You know the form. I wasn't paying much attention to what went on. I was looking out of the window at the town, thinking it was likely to be good-bye to the busy world.

[7] Town.

A pretty little place it was, with trees and a stream of water along each side of every street, the market square in the middle and shops and stores clustered round it—a couple of churches, the club, the Masonic Hall, nice girls, tennis courts, flowers, H.Q. offices in what once had been a private mansion set like a jewel in a garden. They're pretty much all the same.

I was sent to jail at Pretoria by the coach, a regular Deadwood Dick affair with leather springs and a twelve-mule team, changed every nine miles. It was frightfully dusty. One nigger drove while another plied the long whip. There must have been gold aboard, for we had an escort of six troopers—two with us, two in front, and two behind. Oh, I travelled in style!

There isn't much more to tell. They used me white—didn't treat me, for some reason, as criminals are and should be treated. I could feel their friendliness. But no more Africa for me when they gave me a cheap suit of civvies and told me I could go—too many bitter memories.

I had a bit of money put by, and I booked a passage as far as it would take me. That happened to be Rio—rough and roystering Rio it was then. But memories followed; didn't even wait for the next ship. I tried to drown them and they wouldn't drown. Then I tried to slip them again: got a stoker's billet, sweated the rotten whisky out of me and found myself in Melbourne—headed for the Marble Bar, naturally. Tried station riding and lost my job; didn't want it, anyway, and the liquor'd lost its bite. Drifted up to Darwin—Thursday Island—Soeribaia—Hongkong—Honolulu. It was there I found merciful forgetfulness for a while in the good "black smoke." Then Seattle—blatant, booming, bombastic, barbarian Seattle! I left there as soon as I could raise the price, and kept going—on and on, like the Wandering Jew.

Must be touching bottom now—and the string's about played out. The jail doctor that saw me last gave me his word for that. I'm through and smashed and finished, and no one to care a tinker's curse.... But I'd like this (the catskin was laid on the orderly table) to be somewhere else than in the garbage can.... It—it means something to me still!

POSTSCRIPT I

SCIENCE HOLDS THE SCALES

The Professor carefully relighted his neglected pipe. The grate fire had burned low. Night had come unmarked. There was a shuffling of chairs. They drew a concerted deep breath. The tension was broken.

"But that's not the end?" Brown protested. "Can't be? Come, give us the rest of it!"

"I'm afraid there isn't much more to tell," the Professor hesitated. "As I've told you, I felt deeply for the chap. Something about him drew me to him uncommonly. He may have had that white magnet-stone about him? When he'd finished I felt almost indecent, sitting there gawping at him. And there wasn't a thing I could say. The silence lengthened awkwardly.

"I picked up the scrap of pelt and studied it perfunctorily, more to give him a chance to pull himself together than from any immediate interest in the thing itself. But you know how it is with us scientific sharks? I soon was scrutinising it sharply on its own account and on account of what he'd told me, and presently looked up to see him still glooming there with unseeing eyes.

"'Look here,' I said, 'what makes you so almighty certain this was the same thing she wore?'

"He jumped as if I'd shot him.

"'Why—why, it must have been,' he stammered. 'There couldn't have been any other.... It isn't found in Africa—only in the Himalayas—in Assam——'

"'But that doesn't say it couldn't be found as well on the Chinese side of the mid-Asian highlands,' I objected. 'Its habitat likely would extend into the Thibetan range. Then why take it for granted it isn't found also in far-western China?'

"He studied a bit on that. The dull eyes had grown feverishly bright.

"'That might be so,' he grudgingly conceded. 'But—but—what are you staring at so? For God's sake what's in your mind?'

"I had fished out my magnifying glass and was giving the skin a thorough up-and-down. And as I examined it, suspicion grew. I was on my own ground, nosing like a hound on a hot scent. He had almost to shout his question again in my ear.

"'And if *Felis Marmorata* is found in the western China hinterland, is it not possible,' I asked, 'that this might rightly have belonged to the Chinaman? You say the cat was shot on one of the Indian rivers? *Where's the bullet mark?*'

"He reached out, but his hand shook so he could scarcely pick it up; and, with it in his hand, he could hardly focus the glass.

"'When an animal is killed by rifle-shot, the bullet, you must know, makes a small round wound, and usually the skin afterwards is neatly patched with a little circular piece of the same fur, if it can be got, fitted into the hole and deftly stitched. I couldn't find a sign of such a wound, nor of any such mending.

"'But I did find—and I pointed it out to him—a longitudinal slit just such as might have been made by a cutting instrument of some sort—a spear or an arrow. And it had been sewn up; the minute stitches were made with Chinese silk. The thing might once have formed one of those tiny bags such as Orientals use for keeping nicknacks in in their kits.

"He stared at that stitching, biting his dry lips. Then he crumpled up, shivering, in his chair.

"'My God!' the words seemed torn from him. 'You're right, man—you're right! ... And I killed him! I'm not only a murderer—I'm a blind, blundering fool!'"

The Professor relapsed into silence, puffing vigorously. They waited for him to go on.

"And...?" Bradley prodded him.

"And that's all," he said. "We threshed it out then and there—came to the conclusion on that strange scrap of circumstantial evidence, the Exhibit 'A' that was all the case, that it couldn't have been her moocha at all!"

"And the man?" Brown spoke for all. "What became of him?"

"I never saw him again. He drifted that night."

POSTSCRIPT II

AS ONE SCIENTIST TO ANOTHER

(Extract from Letter of Cyrus Merriman, M.A., F.R.G.S., M.C.I., etc., etc., to Professor Mark Fidlerton.)

"... You will, I feel confident, be interested to know that upon completion of my research work in the Sankuru valley, the essential results of which are fairly embodied in my advance report to appear in the forthcoming issue of the Association journal, opportunity presented for me to pay a visit I long had promised myself to the Sankaeli hill country and its interesting system of tunnels, caves, and galleries, many of which present indisputable evidence of human occupancy antedating all authentic records and of a vanished civilization of which science has no knowledge. This field, I saw enough to convince me, will well repay carefully organized attention, particularly with a view to the possible interpretation of messages from the long dead past contained in sundry petroglyphic records of a prehistoric race that must at some early period of earth's history have here resided for a considerable time.

"These demonstrate not alone superior draftsman and colorist skill, the crude pictures being both incised and painted in vegetable blues, yellows, blacks and whites of remarkable permanence, but are peculiarly intriguing in that they disclose suggestions of a rudimentary semi-symbolic system of writing, apparently a step beyond primary ideography and essentially differing from the early Egyptian phonetics, while evincing no relationship to the Sumerian nail-writings. I am hoping to secure the invaluable co-operation in further research work of our mutual friend Dr. Max Steinberger; and if only adequate financing can be secured (and surely there should be no money impediment in these days of fast-breeding multi-millionaires thus to further the glorious cause of science?), am looking forward with much interest to returning thither early in the coming year.

"It was in this field, you will remember, that the man Gentil, concerning whom you wrote me while I was in the Broken Hill region, had his farmstead; and, thinking you might still be interested and in accordance with my promise, I took occasion while there to make guarded inquiries in hope of ascertaining what eventually became of the man.

"Results, I regret, are meagre. Officially nothing is known. He seems to have disappeared as suddenly and as inexplicably as he appeared in Sankaeliland. He was last seen apparently just prior to Bambata's abortive outbreak, and it is suggested may have been one of the many isolated victims of those ghastly days of terror. Personally I am far from convinced that this explanation is tenable. If anyone thereabouts enjoyed the confidence and friendship of the indigenous blacks and shared their antipathies toward both Britisher and Boer, he would have seemed to have done so. He had sworn blood-brothership^[1] with Sankaeli, and unquestionably was under that old rogue's protection; and yet I am inclined to believe, patching together as best I can chance scraps of native talk, that he met his end by the stake within that chief's principal kraal. Mystery surrounds his death as it did his life, and I doubt if aught more will be learned concerning it. The African hills hold their secrets well.

[1] Two small pieces of meat are secured and a sponsor for each of the prospective blood-brothers holds one in his hand. The master-of-ceremonies then invokes a series of curses on either party untrue to the blood-brotherhood pledge, after which a slight incision is made in the chest of each candidate; the blood from these incisions is smeared on the meat and each party devours that

piece smeared with the blood of the other.

"Considerable public attention has latterly been focussed on these Sankaeliland hills, as you may have gathered from the newspaper press, by reason of the reputed discovery in one of the major caves of a diamondiferous clay that seemingly had been worked haphazardly and hurriedly, and persistent rumours that a mysterious white man had been hanging about the *locus* some time ago and got clean away to Amsterdam with a fortune in uncut stones. He is reputed to have taken train from Olifantsfontein, with an uncommonly handsome blonde companion. The police evidently suspected him as an I.D.B., and while he was there went through his belongings with a fine-tooth comb, but without getting the goods on him. It was whispered afterward that he had had the loot in plain sight while they were searching, painted over and used for Mah Jong counters! Clever, what?

"I should have liked to have come up with this person for, from what I hear, he had spent some time knocking about the cave district, stirring up blue clay and a diamond pipe in an ancient crater, where such a formation would seem a geological anachronism. Of course his only thought would be diamonds (in which I am not in the least interested), but he quite possibly may have run across things of scientific value that *would* be worth while. However, he got clear of the country, and there's small chance of his ever being heard of again...."

POSTSCRIPT III

TRAIL'S END

(From Ralph Canover to Professor Mark Fullerton.)

"*Savage Club,*
"*London, W.C.*
"*November 5.*

"My unsuspecting benefactor and dear Professor,

"Skimming through my *Times* at breakfast, I read with interest your appeal to friends of science to so assist Col. Lawrence that he may be able to continue his explorations in the upper Amazon valley; and my moribund conscience was so rudely jolted by sight of your name as to offset a constitutional antipathy to pen and paper. I have in all honesty intended writing you—to-morrow—almost daily during the past six months. Procrastination always has been my favourite sin.

"No, it will serve no purpose for you to turn to the signature at the bottom of this scrawl. It will carry no meaning even to your wise eyes. And yet it is the name of one who owes everything in this world to your kind heart and shrewd deductions from a microscopic premise.

"Still groping for a clue to the identity of the impertinent scribbler who trespasses on your useful time? Cast your mind back: Do you recall a certain mild September afternoon two years ago, and a disreputable ne'er-do-well who drifted into your Museum and to whom you gave a heartening tot of good liquor, an excellent dinner, and a sympathetic ear while he spun what must have sounded like a madman's preposterous tale, illustrated with a tattered pelt of *Felis Marmorata*—the 'Marbled Cat' of the high Himalayas?

"It is that down-and-out who now has the honour to sign himself your most grateful and devoted servant. For it was through you Hope was reborn for him and life given an objective that, through generous Providence, has been more than

realized.

"You were kind enough, when thus we met, to listen with more than a scholar's interest to the rambling story of one who had plumbed the depths of misery and was at the end of things. It may interest you to have the sequel, particularly as it confirms all you said that night, and proves your deductions from very slender facts.

"I should, of course, have seen you again, but, as you must have realized, I was in far from normal shape at that time, and the crux of our talk was such that I tramped the night through, trying to weigh and analyze what you had pointed out and readjust my faculties to the amazing possibilities of conclusions I had not dreamed of. There could be but one outcome: I had to get back to Africa as fast as steam would take me and put those conclusions to the test—begin my quest again, with two years lost.

"I landed in Durban in late October, having worked my passage; and tramped it to Sankaeliland from the mines, taking short cuts. You may imagine what such a hike means to a man bred horseback, especially in stifling Christmas weather as we get it out there, but I scarcely noticed it. My mind was set on getting back to the familiar hills with a minimum time loss.

"And when I did, Fate's hand was still against me. A patrol of Burgher recruits had taken over at the old Post—dull-witted, taciturn chaps who took me for a suspicious sort and for a time kept inconveniently close tab on my movements. The farmstead in the hidden kloof was utterly deserted, the garden choked with weeds, the fields fast going back to jungle, the huts a litter and the house a wreck. Nowhere could I get news of Gentil, nor did I see a familiar face—hear a remembered voice. And yet when I found my way to that lonely hillside grave in which Meisje's mother had slept for a score of years, it showed kindly care! No weeds trespassed near that sacred mound, on which English roses bloomed bravely—roses and forget-me-nots.

"Of Zeete, as of the farmer, there was no trace.

"Day followed empty day. Many theories I built up carefully in turn to prove them worthless. Again the Black Dog shadowed my every step. Poignant memories banished sleep. My little store of money quickly melted. I lived I know not how, and each day dragged myself to the lily pool, where I would lie for hours outstretched on the cool grass in the mimosa's shade, unseeing eyes turned to the brassy sky.

"It was thus I lounged one morning, despair possessing me, half-minded to end all by a dive from the high cliff, when I noted idly a female baboon in my old friendly banyan. Indifferently I marked her downward progress until, to my surprise, I saw that she clutched close an armful of tiny arrows. Lightly, confidently, she dropped bough by bough to the verdant carpet, hugging her curious burden; and, all unhesitant, entered the pool itself. I had the wind of her and she had not caught sight of me. Amazed, I watched her. She made no pause but, *taking each step with care, went zigzagging forward into the fall itself and disappeared!*

"My senses swam. I stood in the scorching sun and felt it not. Memories of Meisje crowded—how she had so strangely and swiftly come and gone from this same sweet pool. Could it be that the key to that mystery was at my hand? Shaken and stumbling, yet once more vaguely hoping, I did what I had never thought to do before—carefully studied the pool itself. Submerged completely, yet plainly visible if one looked closely, were stepping-stones in series, eight in all, leading directly into the mist-embroidered fall! I also breasted it, passing 'through the thundering waters' to find myself fronted by a dim vaulted passage in the eternal rock, the end of which was blotted out by darkness. *The riddle of the pool was read!*

"Long I groped about in the midnight dark, bruised and battered by frequent jarring contacts with out-jutting ledges, now feeling a trodden path beneath my feet, now tripped by litter or choked by the dust of ages, incapable of coherent thought, until I fell exhausted, the air grown sickly stale. And still an insistent inner voice urged me on. Painfully I retraced my steps, feeling my way, until the fall again made music in my ears—passed once more through it, and gathered up a store of knots to burn as torches, with which I went straightway back.

"I need not weary you with useless detail. The passage leads deviously to enormous caverns, one hugely proportioned, its surface area that of a city square, the natural ceiling lost in distance overhead, and this colossal

chamber closely set with what I at first mistook for distorted marble columns, like hour-glasses in shape—stalactites and stalagmites that had formed connection in their centuries' growth.

"This was in long past times, it seems, the central hidden court of the Little People, and holds many curious mementoes of that strange race. Students of such concerns should find them of absorbing interest. Countless tunnels and galleries radiate from this great court. The whole range of hills, indeed, is honeycombed, many of the passages extending great distances. One gains the impression that these Bushmen must have lived largely an underground existence, a great community of human ants.

"One tunnel that I traced to its end was upward of twenty-four hundred paces (roughly a mile) in length, and led to an extinct crater in the mountainside, well watered by bubbling springs, beautiful with trees, shrubs, grasses and brilliant flowers in great profusion, save at the farther end, where a dull scar showed. This I found marks long-deserted copper workings in which were primitive tools and much else clearly indicative of hasty abandonment. There were even crude wheel-less trucks of the long-lived cypress, slowly disintegrating, on a grooved rail of ancient metal that is neither brass nor copper, though somewhat akin to both. Others of these vast caves had sheltered workers in divers arts and crafts—potters and jewellers, bakers, armourers, joiners—the weight of dead centuries heavy upon all. Nowhere was there sign of human visitation in many, many years.

"That baboon, something told me, was one of Zeete's troop. I counted on finding her by following wherever it might lead. The witch would know what had befallen Meisje; end the racking incertitude that was driving me almost mad. Did she live, or was she dead as I long had thought? If she had heard the call of the Lords of Rest, life held nothing more for me. I would no more leave those sombre hills that had been hers. Perhaps—perhaps I would test to the uttermost the wizened pigmy's sorceries that once I had laughed at with a fool's contempt....

"But never once did I glimpse the beast again after it had passed from my sight in the water curtain. It had left no spoor that I could discern in the gloomy tunnel; nor did I hear the clamour of any of its kind in the days that followed, in which I scrambled and groped my way through those caveland labyrinths. Time and again I was minded to give over the fruitless search, yet ever came back thereto. Sleeping or waking, Meisje companioned me. In dreams I heard her voice—was comforted by her smile. She beckoned me on. Thus Hope was each morning born, to die with Night. So clear these visions were, an inner consciousness lacking substantial reason told me she still lived and sent her soul through space, calling to me.

"I grew a gaunt, unkempt solitary creature with matted hair and beard, for ever haunting, ghost-like, the dusty catacombs. That I was mad but harmless the countryside agreed, and left me to myself (for which thank God), while, mole-wise, I all but lived in cave and grot and tunnel, marking off one by one as I found it and drew a blank. The sun had grown a stranger; the blacks had learned to shun me as a familiar of the unquiet spirits; nor could I come near to any of the few baboons I chanced to see, which scurried away affrighted.

"A narrow passage I had been following with nagging zeal led suddenly late one afternoon into the pure light of open air and a secluded nook, grass-carpeted and cool, in the mountains' shadow. Here I decided to rest the oncoming night, and put the billy on for a pot of tea. Waiting for it to boil, I lay dourly brooding, blind to the charm of that sylvan solitude. Not even a bird note broke the soothing stillness. And then, like a phantom from the fading past, in silhouette against the sunset glory of the near skyline, I marked a gaunt baboon and knew him in a flash for faithful Nano.

"Discomfitures had taught me some discretion. I strangled a shout of joy and, all atremble, called to him softly. He halted, listening. Again I called—'Nano! Nano! Nano!' careful to make no move. He sniffed the air, warily suspicious, poised for immediate flight advanced a few hesitant steps—halted again to peer in puzzlement through the tangled leafage—caught scent and gravely considered it—drew nearer and a little nearer! My heart was in my throat, as long as curiosity and dull remembrance urged him on whilst timorous instinct counselled instant retreat.

"In my deer-stalking days I had well schooled myself in motionless waiting, though never had it been so hard, nerves at the snapping-point. Success or failure hung on the chance whim of a wandering beast that once, with cause, had stood in fear of me. His memory on that score, luckily, was less keen than mine. Recognition dawned at length in his little questioning eyes. Lips curled back from yellow fangs in a delighted grin. And then he was grunting and capering about me like a joyous dog, while I roughly petted him—and would have given much for the gift of his uncouth speech.

"I never got my tea. Nano romping ahead, we climbed a lofty wooded peak from which cloud-swept height the country for miles around was spread like a huge profile model. Thence was no trail. My hairy guide, excitedly chattering, took nimbly to the trees and vanished in their umbrageous maze. Fearful of losing him, I called till the hills echoed and re-echoed. Presently he was back, grinning and whimpering from above me, no doubt puzzled why I had not followed where he was most at home. There was no other way I quickly discovered; and, wishing myself a Mowgli, I, too, climbed laboriously and passed from tree to tree along thick boughs forming what, I soon realized, was a much-travelled highway of the wildwood folk.

"Nano, always leading, more than redeemed himself. A miracle of patience, he never was thereafter quite lost to sight; and though his ceaseless jabbering was unintelligible, its meanings in essence were evident, shade by shade—caution, encouragement, vexation at my slow progress, amusement that one could be so clumsy and so timorous on what to him was the safe open road!

"Our arboreal pilgrimage, to my relief, was short. Well before evening had settled it brought us out on just such another path as that from the mountain pool to the sheltered farmstead below, and this in turn to the vine-screened mouth of one of the many smaller caverns. Compared with those I had seen, it was an insignificant little den, to which, had I stumbled on it, I would scarce have given a glance.

"Rock-walled, low-roofed and dark, it was not more than thirty feet in length by half that wide. There was no exit unless by a jagged hole at the inner end by which a sizable dog might creep to kennel. Into this Nano dived and I crawled after him, counting to perhaps find Zeete in underground retreat. No glimmer of light showed in that drain-like burrow, yet I was well content to follow the gruntings of the old baboon. The passage was not over-long. Scarcely had the enfiltering light showed that its end was near when we emerged upon a saucer-shaped dell plenteously grassed and on all sides girt by steeply rising hills, a footpath straggling crookedly to a dense copse. This, Nano, barking excitedly, took at such pace I had to fairly run to keep up with him. Impatient eagerness fevered my blood. The witch had won my very warm regard.

"Almost had we gained the grove when there came therefrom a sudden admonishing call that seemed to stop the beating of my heart, while instantly old Nano's chatter ceased! Could I believe my ears? Was I awake, my reason unimpaired? Did the gods favour me beyond belief? ... Again that beloved voice, pitched on a note of question! Nano gave tongue excitedly and went on. Past him I hastened headlong, bewildering joy giving wings to my feet, yet still distrustful of my swimming senses until I saw her running lightly to meet me, while the soft breath of early night bore me the sweetest music ever made:

"My lord! My lord hath come!"

"And then she was in my arms, my cup of bliss over-brimming, the while she laughed and wept and clung to me.... They say great happiness kills. I doubt it much.

"So much had we to say to one another we both for a time were dumb. I was more than content to hold her close, her starry eyes dewy with happy tears for me to kiss away.

"And thou wilt never, never leave me more?" she sobbed in happiness. A hundred questions crowded and would have flooded forth had not come interruption still more amazing than even reunion when I had ceased to dream the gods held such joy for me. A child cried lustily, and she slipped from my encircling arm to flit ahead of me toward the grove, wherein stood a rude hut of thorn and thatch—and on the sward in front two chubby feet uplifted, kicking like little pistons.

"I halted thunderstruck—*the babe was white!*

"And while I stood and gaped, Meisje had swiftly stooped and the small rosy one was gurgling in her arms. She turned again to me, aglow with mother love.

"Did rowdy Nano wake the little man!" she crooned to the snuggling mite. 'Nay, open thy blue eyes—a smile to greet thy father!'

"You should see that husky tike—little more than a yearling, and marching about like a grenadier! Straight and sturdy as a little soldier, too, and quick as a flash to notice everything!

"But to my story: It was wise old Zeete who had checkmated our enemies. Having seen us set forth, she had returned to her place in lonely grief. 'There her spirits came to her,' my wonder-woman says; and there is much in this beyond my understanding. They told her (or the dame fortunately so imagined) of the recall of Sankaeli's men, but also that their Chinese friends had not been so dissuaded from our pursuit, and even then danger pressed us close. She with her baboons immediately set forth to warn and aid us, but came too late.

"We had been set upon, as she read in the trampled track, and she must unwittingly have passed me as I lay senseless, following fast at first on the spoor of our frightened beasts. The Chinese (counting on rich reward from the old king) she came up with after night had fallen, the Princess bound and cruelly near to death with weariness and suffering by the way, so that her foster-mother believed her gone and took full vengeance on the yellow cut-throats. A poisoned lion had figured in the coolies' plan, its rotting carcass placed near to the track, scenting which, our horses had broken in terror.

"The outlaw band had numbered four, but others followed hard upon their heels, so that the poor woman had been close pressed to contrive escape from these, and not without fatal wounds. From these she suffered grievously, but kept life's spark aglow through a fortnight of horror in which my brave girl companioned and cared for her, while they hid like hunted beasts in holes and trees, sleepless and famishing save for a few mealies the baboons contrived to fetch.

"They had at length won through to the sanctuary of the little dell where I had found my bride, but the land was ablaze with war, and prudence forced them for a time to lie closely hid. Even with her last breath the witch had cautioned Meisje to there wait patiently till love in time should lead me to her side.

"The little sorceress had ever a strong will and much uncanny wisdom of her years. She had tutored my wilderness wife in much of what passes for dread magic with ignorant folk, especially enjoining that she should seek a silent place each evening and concentrate thought and will on summoning me wherever I might be. I wonder if some women are truly clairvoyant? She speaks of her delight *when she saw me meet you*, and of *seeing me* turn to Africa again!

"And then I knew our night was almost waned,' she simply states, 'and waited happily for thy return.'

"Much must have passed between her and her strange godmother in their last days together that closely touched Bushman legends and the occultism of that race. Of these mysterious matters the greater part she withholds even from me. And she has suffered so much, it would be cruel indeed to press idle curiosity.

"The wisdom of the ages is my care,' she says seriously, 'nor may the truths be told while yet man wars with man, straying perversely from the paths of Right. In time Man may come again to walk in the Light of Truth. Till then my lips are sealed for mankind's good.'

"Some things she has spoken of that would astound if published to the world, and yet she holds these of small account. Thus when I questioned her as to her necklet of diamonds, she laughed at me as at a child delighted with shining pebbles, and led me to an ancient place where was great store of such, so that in this at least were made true Zeete's words as to a Bushman treasure.

"As to one other secret passed on from her foster mother, my wife and I, after long thought upon it, had decided to first write you. The mystery of that magical light intrigued me much, and this I have learned about it: that alchemists of times long past, by some forgotten process, I know not what, produced a rare white metal from pitchblende, of which there are large deposits thereabouts, as well as in the Congo valley also. From this strange metal not only is the light derived, an artificial illuminant as far superior to electric as that light to a tallow dip, but seemingly its potentialities are widely diversified. Its latent properties and possibilities should be inquired into by competent scientists, and only with extreme precautions against mischance, for it appears to have been employed as well as a powerful lethal force. The witch's wand was a minute example. I have it now, safe in a deposit vault.

"Development of this force for military offence might easily place in the hands of any nation holding its secret such

annihilative superiority in wholesale man-killing that domination of the world by that power would be easily possible. One should hesitate long therefore before taking the awful responsibility of loosing on the troubled universe such a murderous weapon, while it might conceivably be mis-used for the glut of selfish individual or national ambitions....

"I doubt, indeed, if we should have disclosed what little I now know as to the source of the magical light had not its basic principle been, as the witch-doctress once told me, 'life as well as death.' It is said to have been much employed in ancient days in combating mortal ailments such as dread cancer; and it is in this connection primarily that we have now about decided to invite the co-operation of such savants as make this particular field of research their own. In this I hope to have your advice and helpful suggestions. Financial requirements we shall amply provide for; there need be no publicity on that head.

"I should also esteem it a real privilege if you would let me know what sum will abundantly cover Col. Lawrence's needs, to supply it, through you, anonymously, so that his work, so close to your heart, may go on without delay. This will but insignificantly express my deep appreciation of your scholarly attainments so casually demonstrated in your comments upon a certain scrap of pelt, remaking life and fortune for

"Your devoted and most grateful servant,
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* * * * *

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