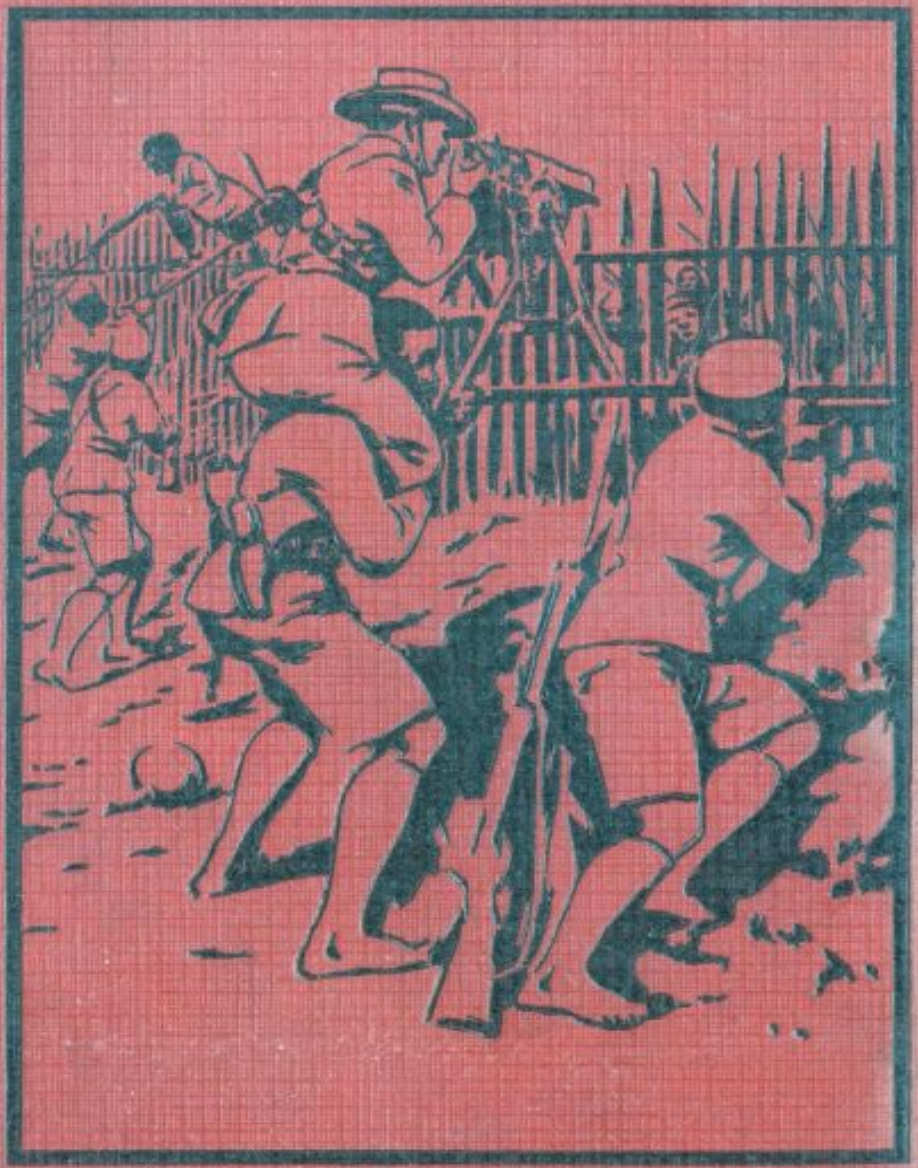
WILMSHURST OF THE FRONTIER FORCE



PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Title: Wilmshurst of the Frontier Force

Author: Westerman, Percy Francis

Date of first publication: 1918

Date first posted: March 17, 2013

Date last updated: June 30, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20180713

Produced by Al Haines

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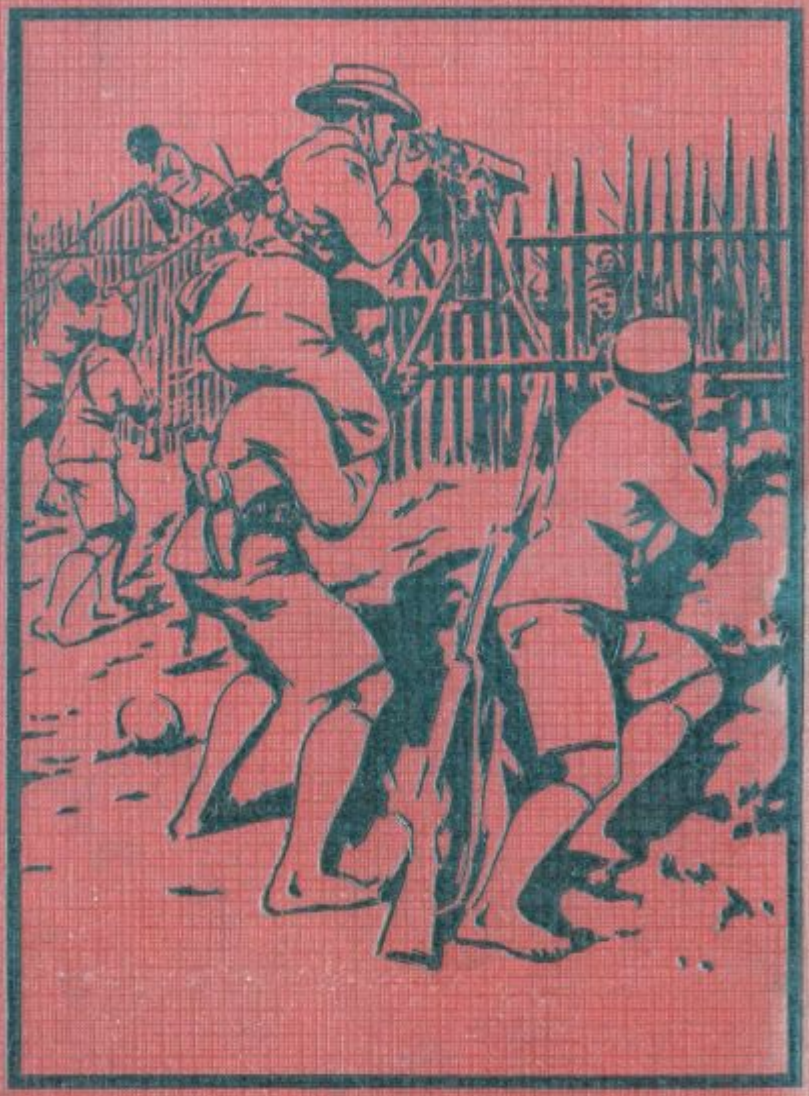

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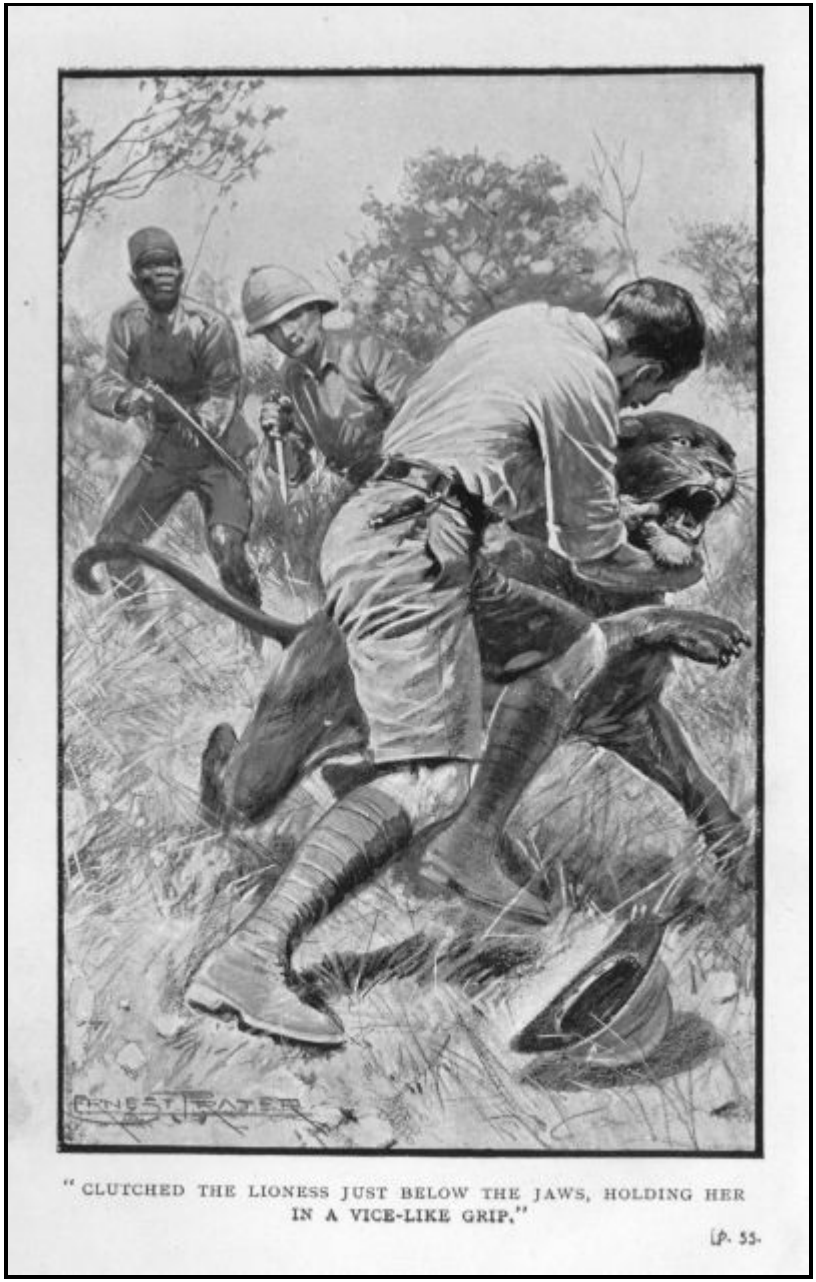

"CLUTCHED THE LIONESS JUST BELOW THE JAWS, HOLDING HER IN A VICE-LIKE GRIP."

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WILMSHURST OF THE FRONTIER FORCE

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

AUTHOR OF "BILLY BARCROFT, R.N.A.S,"
"A SUB. OF THE R.N.R," ETC., ETC.

Publishers
PARTRIDGE
London
1918

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WILMSHURST OF THE FRONTIER FORCE

CHAPTER I

ON ACTIVE SERVICE

"Four o'clock mornin', sah; bugle him go for revally."

Dudley Wilmshurst, Second Lieutenant of the Nth West African Regiment, threw off the light coverings, pulled aside the mosquito curtains, and sat upon the edge of his cot, hardly able to realise that Tari Barl, his Haussa servant, had announced the momentous news. Doubtful whether his senses were not playing him false Wilmshurst glanced round the room. On a metal table, the legs of which stood in metal jars filled with water and paraffin to counteract the ravages of the white ants, lay his field-equipment—a neatly-rolled green canvas valise with his name and regiment stamped in bold block letters; his Sam Browne belt with automatic pistol holster attached; his sword—a mere token of authority but otherwise little better than a useless encumbrance—and a pair of binoculars in a leather case that bore signs of the excessive dampness of the climate on The Coast, as the littoral of the African shore 'twixt the Niger and the Senegal Rivers is invariably referred to by the case-hardened white men who

have fought against the pestilential climate and won.

A short distance from the oil stove on which a kettle was boiling, thanks to the energy and thoughtfulness of Private Tari Barl, stood an assortment of camp equipment: canvas *tent d'abri*, ground sheets, aluminium mess traps, a folding canvas bath, and last but not least an indispensable Doulton pump filter.

When a man's head is buzzing from the effects of strong doses of quinine, and his limbs feel limp and almost devoid of strength, it is not to be wondered at that he is decidedly "off colour." It was only Wilmshurst's indomitable will that had pulled him through a bout of malaria in time to be passed fit for active service with the "Waffs," as the West African Field Force is commonly known from the initial letters of the official designation.

And here was Tari Barl—"Tarry Barrel," his master invariably dubbed him—smiling all over his ebony features as he stood, clad in active service kit and holding a cup of fragrant tea.

Tari Barl was a typical specimen of the West African native from whom the ranks of the Coast regiments are recruited. In height about five feet ten, he was well built from his thighs upwards. Even his loosely-fitting khaki tunic did not conceal the massive chest with its supple muscles and the long, sinewy arms that knew how to swing to the rhythm of bayonet exercise. His legs, however, were thin and spindly. To any one not accustomed to the native build it would seem strange that the apparently puny lower limbs could support such a heavy

frame. He was wearing khaki shorts and puttees; even the latter, tightly fitting, did little to disguise the meagreness of his calves. He was barefooted, for the West African soldier has a rooted dislike to boots, although issued as part of his equipment. On ceremonial parades he will wear them, outwardly uncomplainingly, but at the first opportunity he will discard them, slinging the unnecessary footgear round his neck. Thorns, that in the "bush" will rip the best pair of British-made marching-boots to shreds in a very short time, trouble him hardly at all, for the soles of his feet, which with the palms of his hands are the only white parts of his epidermis, are as hard as iron.

"All my kit ready, Tarry Barrel?" enquired Wilmshurst as he sipped his tea.

"All ready, sah; Sergeant Bela Moshi him lib for tell fatigue party mighty quick. No need worry, sah."

Dismissing his servant the subaltern "tubbed" and dressed. They start the day early on the Coast, getting through most of the routine before nine, since the intense heat of the tropical sun makes strenuous exertion not only unpleasant but highly dangerous.

But to-day was of a different order. The regiment was to embark at eight o'clock on board the transport *Zungeru* for active service in the vast stretch of country known as "German East," where the Huns with their well-trained Askaris, or native levies, were putting up a stiff resistance against the Imperial and Colonial troops of the British Empire.

On his way to the mess Wilmshurst ran up against Barkley, the P.M.O. of the garrison.

"Hullo there!" exclaimed the doctor. "How goes it? Fit?"

"Absolutely," replied the subaltern.

The doctor smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He knew perfectly well that no officer warned for active service would reply otherwise.

"Buzzing all gone?"

"Practically," replied Wilmshurst.

"All right; stick to five grains of quinine during the whole of the voyage—and don't be afraid to let me know if you aren't up to the mark. Suppose you've heard nothing further of your brother?"

Wilmshurst shook his head.

"Not since the letter written just before the war, and that took nearly twelve months before it reached me. It's just possible that Rupert is in the thick of it with the Rhodesian crush."

Barkley made no comment. He was an old college chum of Rupert Wilmshurst, who was fifteen years older than his brother Dudley. The elder Wilmshurst was a proverbial rolling stone. Almost as soon as he left Oxford he went abroad and, after long wanderings in the interior of China, Siberia, and Manchuria, where his adventures merely stimulated the

craving for wandering on the desolate parts of the earth, he went to the Cape, working his way up country until he made a temporary settlement on the northern Rhodesian shores of Lake Tanganyika.

It was thence that he wrote to his brother Dudley, who had just taken up a Crown appointment on the Coast, mentioning that he had penetrated into the territory known as German East.

The subaltern remembered the letter almost by heart.

"There'll be trouble out here before very long," wrote Rupert. "Britishers settling down in this part almost invariably roll a cricket-pitch or lay out a football field. With Hans it is very different. The Germans' idea of colonization is to start building up a military organization. Every 'post' in which there are German settlers has its company of armed blacks—Askaris they call them. And as for ammunition, they are laying in stores sufficient to wage a two-years' war; not merely small arms ammunition, but quick-firer shells as well. Quite by accident I found kegs of cartridges buried close to my camp. For what reason? The natives are quiet enough, so the ammunition is not for use against them. I am sending this letter by a trusty native to be posted at Pambete, as it would be unwise to make use of the German colonial post. Meanwhile I am penetrating further into this stretch of territory under the Black Cross Ensign—possibly in the direction of Tabora. My researches may be taken seriously by the Foreign Office, but I have my doubts. Fortunately I have a jolly good pal with me, a Scotsman named Macgregor, whom I met at Jo-burg. Don't be anxious if you don't hear from me for some time."

The letter was dated July, 1914, and three years, Dudley reflected, is a very exaggerated interpretation of the term "some time." Even taking into consideration the lack of efficient internal and external communication, the state of war embroiling practically the whole civilized world and the perils to which shipping was subjected owing to the piratical exploits of the Huns—all these facts would hardly offer sufficient explanation for a total absence of news from Rupert Wilmshurst unless——

There are parts of Africa which are still described as the Dark Continent—wild, desolate stretches where a man can disappear without leaving the faintest trace of the manner of his presumed death, while in German East there were unscrupulous despots—the disciples of atrocious kultur—only too ready to condemn an Englishman without even the farcical formality of a court-martial.

Already events had proved that Rupert Wilmshurst's statement was well-founded. In her African colonies, in Kiau-Chau, and elsewhere for years past Germany had been assiduously preparing for The Day. Under the firm but erroneous impression that Great Britain would have her hands full in connection with affairs at home, that the Boers in South Africa would revolt and that the Empire would fall to pieces at the declaration of war between England and Germany, the Hun in Africa had prepared huge stores of munitions and trained thousands of native troops with the intention of wresting the adjoining ill-defended territories from their owners.

No wonder that the Huns hugged themselves with delight when by a disastrous stroke of statesmanship Great Britain

exchanged the crumbling island of Heligoland for some millions of square miles of undeveloped territory hitherto held by Germany. While Heligoland was being protected by massive concrete walls and armed by huge guns to form a practically impregnable bulwark to the North Sea coast of Germany, England was by peaceful methods developing her new African acquisition. Germany could then afford to wait until the favourable opportunity and by force of arms seize and hold the territory that was once hers and which in the meantime had enormously increased commercially at the expense of Britain.

But the Kaiser had miscalculated the loyalty of the colonies. Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, to say nothing of smaller offshoots of the Empire, had rallied to the flag. Boers who fourteen years previously had fought doggedly and determinedly against England volunteered for service, and their offer was accepted for expeditions against German West Africa and then against German East, while shoulder to shoulder with their late enemies were Imperial troops, including Indian and West African contingents. Amongst the reinforcements from the latter was the Nth West African Regiment.

By six o'clock breakfast was over and the troops were falling in for parade and C.O.'s inspection. As Second Lieutenant Wilmshurst crossed the dusty barrack "square," which was a rectangle enclosed on three sides by the native huts and on the fourth by the Quartermaster's "stores" and orderly room, he found that the men of his platoon were already drawn up in full marching order. At the sight of their young officer—for it was the first time for several weeks that

Wilmshurst had appeared on parade—a streak of dazzling ivory started and stretched from end to end of the line as the Haussas' mouths opened wide in welcoming smiles, displaying a lavish array of teeth that contrasted vividly with their ebony features.

That Wilmshurst was popular with his men there could be no doubt. Had it been otherwise not a suspicion of a smile would have appeared upon their faces. The subaltern had the knack of handling African troops, and without that knack an officer might just as well transfer elsewhere. Firmness, strict impartiality, and consideration for the welfare of the men under his orders had been rewarded by a whole-hearted devotion on the part of the blacks to "Massa Wilmst," while every man had the satisfaction that he was known by name to the junior subaltern.

The company officer had not yet put in an appearance, but the platoon commanders and their subordinates were engaged either in discussing impending plans or else minutely examining their men's equipment, lest the eagle eye of the C.O. should detect some deficiency during the forthcoming inspection.

"All correct, sergeant?" enquired Wilmshurst, addressing a tall Haussa, Bela Moshi by name.

The sergeant saluted smartly, replying, with a broad smile, that everything was in order. A child by nature, Bela Moshi had developed into a smart and efficient soldier without losing the simple characteristics of the African native. He was a first-class marksman, although it had required long and patient

training to get him to understand the use of sights and verniers and to eradicate the belief, everywhere prevalent amongst savage races, that to raise the backsight to its highest elevation results in harder hitting by the bullet.

Bela Moshi was smart with the machine-gun, too, while for scouting and tracking work there were few who equalled him. The regiment was father and mother to the ebon warrior, while of all the officers Wilmshurst was his special favourite.

The subaltern realised it but could give no reason for Bela Moshi's preferential treatment; not that Wilmshurst had gone out of his way to favour the man. He treated the rank and file of his platoon with impartial fairness, ever ready to hear complaints, but woe betide the black who tried to "get to windward" of the young officer.

Upon the approach of the C.O. the ranks stiffened. The display of ivory vanished, and with thick, pouting lips, firmly closed, and eyes fixed rigidly in front the men awaited the minute inspection.

Colonel Quarrier was a man who had grown grey in the service of the Crown. For over thirty years he had held a commission in the Nth West Africa Regiment, rising from a fresh young Second Lieutenant to the rank of Colonel Commandant and ruler of the destinies of nearly a thousand men. "Case hardened" to the attacks of mosquitos, his system overcharged with malarial germs until the scourge of the Coast failed to harm him, Colonel Quarrier possessed one of the principal qualifications for bush-fighting in the Tropics—a "salted" constitution.

Already he had served in four African campaigns, having but recently taken part in the comparatively brief but strenuous Kamarun expedition. He was a past-master in the art of fighting in miasmic jungles, and now he was about to engage in operations on a larger and slightly different scale—bush-fighting in German East, where ranges of temperature are experienced from the icy cold air of the upper ground of Kilimanjaro to the sweltering heat of the low-lying land but a few degrees south of the Line.

The parade over a hoarse order rang out. A drum and bugle band belonging to another regiment struck up a lively air and the black and khaki lines swung about into "column of route."

The "Waffs" were off to the conquest of the last of Germany's ultra-European colonies.

CHAPTER II

CHAOS IN THE CABIN

It was a march of about five miles to the beach along a straight road bordered with palm trees. At some distance from the highway the country was thick with scrub, from which the sickly smell of the mangroves rose in the still slanting rays of the sun.

Most of the heavy baggage had already been sent down, but with the troops were hundreds of native carriers, each bearing a load of about sixty pounds, while crowds of native women and children flocked to see the last of the regiment for some time to come.

The embarkation had to be performed by means of boats from the open beach, against which white rollers surged heavily, the thundering of the surf being audible for miles. At a long distance from the shore, so that she appeared little larger than a boat, lay the transport *Zungeru*, rolling sluggishly at a single anchor, while steaming slowly in the offing was a light cruiser detailed to act as escort to the convoy, for more transports were under orders to rendezvous off Cape Coast Castle.

Amidst the loud and discordant vociferations of the native boatmen the troops boarded the broad, shallow-drafted surf boats, each man having the breech-mechanism of his rifle carefully wrapped in oiled canvas to prevent injury from salt water. In batches of twenty the Waffs left their native soil, but

not before three boat loads had been unceremoniously capsized in the surf, to the consternation of the men affected and the light-hearted merriment of their more fortunate comrades.

Without mishap Wilmshurst gained the accommodation-ladder of the *Zungeru*, where brawny British mercantile seamen, perspiring freely in the torrid heat, were energetically assisting their black passengers on board with encouraging shouts of "Up with you, Sambo!" "Mind your nut, Darkie!" and similar exhortations. The while derricks were swaying in and out, whipping the baggage from the holds of the lighters that lay alongside, grinding heavily in the swell, fenders notwithstanding.

Having seen the men of his platoon safely on board Wilmshurst went below to the two-berthed cabin which he was to share with Laxdale, the subaltern of No. 2 platoon.

Opening the door Wilmshurst promptly ducked his head to avoid a sweeping blow with a knotted towel which his brother officer was wielding desperately and frantically.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Laxdale breathlessly. "Come in and bear a hand. Hope I didn't flick you."

"What's wrong?" enquired Dudley, eyeing with feelings of apprehension the sight of the disordered cabin. "Looks as if a Hun four-point-one had been at work here."

The "traps" of both subalterns were littering the floor in utmost confusion. Sheets, blankets and mosquito nets had been torn from the bunks, while a smashed water-bottle and glass bore testimony to the erratic onslaught of the wildly excited

Laxdale.

"Almost wish it had," exclaimed the harassed subaltern. "I was unpacking my kit when a whopping big rat jumped out of this valise. I'll swear that rascal of a servant of mine knows all about it. I had to give him a dressing down yesterday for losing some of my gear. We'll have to find the animal, Wilmshurst. A rat is my pet abomination."

"Why not leave the door open?" suggested Dudley.

"An' let the bounder go scot-free?" added Laxdale, a gleam of grim determination in his eyes. "No jolly fear. We'll lay him out properly. Here you are, take this."

He handed Wilmshurst a towel roller made of teak, forming a heavy and effective weapon.

"This is where I think the brute's hiding," continued Laxdale, indicating a long drawer under the lowermost bunk. "I was stowing some of my gear away when I spotted him. After five minutes' strafing he disappeared, but goodness knows how he managed to get through that little slit. Now stand by."

Entering into the spirit of the chase Dudley knelt down and waited with poised stick while Laxdale charily opened the drawer. Like most drawers on board ship and frequently elsewhere it jammed. By frantic up and down movements the subaltern freed it. Then he waited, both officers listening intently. Not a sound came from within.

"Don't suppose the brute's there after all. He must have

effected a strategic movement.... Look out, by Jove!"

Acting upon his impression Laxdale had tugged the drawer half open. Instantly there was a vision of a dark object darting with lightning-like rapidity.

Down came Wilmshurst's towel roller a fraction of a second too late for Mister Rat. At the same time Laxdale moved his hands along the ledge of the drawer and received the full force of the blow across the knuckles.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Wilmshurst.

Laxdale, nursing the injured hand, made no audible comment. Deliberately he relieved Dudley of the towel-roller, throwing his companion the knotted towel in exchange.

"Where's the brute now?" he asked grimly.

A scuffling noise in a tin bath suspended from the cork-cemented roof of the cabin betrayed the rodent's temporary hiding-place. Both men looked first at the bath and then at each other.

"It would be as well if we put our helmets on," suggested Wilmshurst, replacing his "double-pith" headgear. "Now, I'll shake the bath and you let rip when he falls. But please don't try to get your own back on me."

As a precautionary measure Dudley beat the side of the bath with the towel. It might have been efficacious if the subaltern had been engaging in apiarian operations, but as far as present events went it was a "frost."

"Tilt it, old man," suggested Laxdale.

Wilmshurst carried out this suggestion only too well. The bath, slipping from its supporting fixtures, clattered noisily to the floor, its edge descending heavily upon Dudley's foot. Again a momentary vision of the leaping rodent, then, crash! With a mighty sweep of the tower-roller Laxdale demolished the electric-light globe into a thousand fragments.

"Getting on," he remarked cheerfully. "There'll be a big bill for 'barrack damages' eh, what? Where's the brute?"

The rat, terrified by the din, had retired to a recess formed by the bulkhead of the cabin and the fixed wash-basin and was acting strictly on the defensive.

"Aha!" exclaimed Laxdale. "Now you're cornered. No use yelling 'Mercy, kamerad.'"

Levelling the roller like a billiard cue the subaltern prepared to make a thrust and administer the *coup de grâce*, but he had forgotten that he had not yet found his sea-legs. A roll of the ship made him lose his balance, and he pitched head foremost into the rodent's retreat. Like a flash the rat leapt, scampered over Laxdale's helmet, down his back and took refuge in the breast-pocket of Wilmshurst's tunic.

Dudley beat all records in slipping off his Sam Browne and discarding the tunic, for by the time his companion had regained his feet the garment lay on the floor.

"Stamp on it!" yelled the now thoroughly excited and exasperated subaltern.

"It's my tunic, remember," protested Dudley firmly as he pushed his brother-officer aside.

Just then the door opened, and Spofforth, another member of the "Lone Star Crush" appeared, enquiring, "What's all the row about, you fellows? Scrapping?"

"Shut that door!" exclaimed Laxdale hurriedly. "Either in or out, old man."

The hunters suspended operations to wipe the streams of perspiration from their faces and to explain matters.

"Ratting, eh?" queried Spofforth. "You fellows look like a pair of Little Willies looting a French chateau."

"Hullo! More of 'em," murmured Laxdale as the door was unceremoniously pushed open and another of the "One Pip" officers made his appearance. "Look alive, Danvers, and don't stand there looking in the air. Walk in and take a pew, if you can find one."

"I've come to borrow a glass," remarked the latest arrival. "Mine's smashed and my batman hasn't unpacked my aluminium traps. Judging by appearances, by Jove! I've drawn a blank. What's up—a toppin' rag, or have the water pipes burst?"

Wilmshurst and Laxdale sat on the upper bunk, Spofforth on the closed lid of the wash-basin stand, and Danvers found a temporary resting-place on the none too rigid top of a cabin trunk. Each man kept his feet carefully clear of the floor, while four pairs of eyes were fixed upon Dudley's tunic, the folds of

which were pulsating under the violent lung-movements of the sheltering rodent.

"Why not shake the brute out?" suggested Danvers.

"You try it," suggested Laxdale, whose enthusiasm was decidedly on the wane. "Wilmshurst here has turned mouldy. He refuses point blank to let me use his raiment of neutral colour as a door-mat. I might add that if you've ever had the experience of a particularly active member of the rodent family scampering down your back you wouldn't be quite so keen."

"How about turning out the machine-gun section?" asked Spofforth. "Look here, if you fellows want to be ready for tiffen you'd better get a move on. Suppose——"

"Still they come!" exclaimed Laxdale, as a knock sounded on the jalousie of the cabin door. "Come in."

It was Tari Barl in search of his master.

"Tarry Barrel, you old sinner," said Wilmshurst, "can you catch a rat?"

"Me lib for find Mutton Chop, sah," replied the Haussa saluting. "Find him one time and come quick."

Dudley looked enquiringly at his cabin-mate, knowing that Mutton Chop was Laxdale's servant.

"Oh, so that rascal's the culprit," declared Laxdale. "Didn't I say I thought so?"

"Bring Mutton Chop here," ordered Wilmshurst, addressing the broadly smiling Tari Barl.

The Haussa vanished, presently to reappear with almost an exact counterpart of himself. It would be a difficult matter for a stranger to tell the difference between the two natives.

"What d'ye mean, you black scoundrel, by putting a rat into my traps?" demanded Laxdale.

"No did put, sah; him lib for come one time," expostulated Laxdale's servant. "Me play, 'Come to cook-house door,' den him catchee."

Producing a small native flute Mutton Chop began to play a soft air. For perhaps thirty seconds every one and everything else was still in the desolated cabin; then slowly but without any signs of furtiveness the rat pushed his head between the folds of Wilmshurst's tunic, sniffed, and finally emerged, sat up on his hind legs, his long whiskers quivering with evident delight.

Then, with a deft movement, Mutton Chop's fingers closed gently round the little animal, and to the astonishment of the four officers the Haussa placed the rodent in his breast pocket.

"Me hab mascot same as officers, sahs!" he explained. "No put him here, sah; me make tidy."

"And there's the officers' call!" exclaimed Dudley as a bugle rang out. "Dash it all, how's a fellow to put on the thing?"

And he indicated the crumpled tunic.

CHAPTER III

THE RAIDER

Accompanied by five other transports and escorted by the light cruiser *Tompion*, the *Zungeru* ploughed her way at a modest fifteen knots through the tropical waters of the Atlantic. Although there was little to fear from the attacks of U-boats, for up to the present these craft had not appeared south of the Equator, mines had been laid by disguised German ships right in the area where numerous trade routes converge in the neighbourhood of the Cape of Good Hope, while there were rumours, hitherto unconfirmed, that an armed raider was at large in the South Atlantic.

Provided the convoy kept together there was little danger in daytime in that direction, but the possibilities of the raider making a sudden dash during the hours of darkness and using gun and torpedo with disastrous results could not be overlooked.

The issue of lifebelts to the native troops puzzled them greatly. They could not understand the precaution, for they were ignorant of the danger of making voyages in war-time. Their faith in the "big canoes" of King George was so firm that, sea-sickness notwithstanding, they had no doubts or fears concerning their safe arrival in the land where Briton, Boer, Indian and African were doing their level best to stamp out the blight of German kultur.

At four bells (2 a.m.) on the fifth day of the voyage

Wilmshurst was roused from his sleep by a commotion on deck. Men were running hither and thither carrying out a series of orders shouted in stentorian tones. The *Zungeru* was altering course without slackening speed, listing noticeably to starboard as the helm was put hard over.

Almost at the same time Laxdale awoke.

"What's up?" he enquired drowsily.

"I don't know," replied his companion. "I can hear Spofforth and Danvers going on deck. Let's see what's doing."

Acting upon this suggestion the two officers hastily donned their great coats over their pyjamas, slipped their feet into their canvas slices and went on deck.

It was a calm night. The crescent moon was low down in the western sky, but its brilliance was sufficient to enable objects to be seen distinctly. Silhouetted against the slanting beams was the escorting cruiser, which was pelting along at full speed and overhauling the *Zungeru* hand over fist. Although the cruiser and her convoy were without steaming lights the former's yard-arm lamp was blinking out a message in Morse.

The transports were in "double column line ahead," steaming due west instead of following the course that would bring them within sight of Table Bay. Less than a cable's length on the starboard column's beam was the cruiser. She had already overtaken two of the transports, and was now lapping the *Zungeru's* quarter.

The object of this nocturnal display of activity was now

apparent. Less than a mile away was a large steamer, which had just steadied on her helm and was now on a parallel course to that of the convoy.

"Anything startling?" enquired a major of one of the *Zungeru's* officers who was passing.

"Oh, no," was the reply. "A tramp was trying to cut across our bows. The *Tompion* has signalled to know what's her little game. She's just replied that she's the steamship *Ponto*, and wants to know whether there have been any signs of a supposed raider."

The ship's officer continued on his way. The two subalterns, in no hurry to return to their bunks, for the night air was warm and fragrant, remained on deck, watching the manoeuvres of the cruiser and the *Ponto*.

The exchange of signals continued for about ten minutes, then the *Tompion* resumed her station at the head of the convoy, while the *Ponto* took up her position on the beam of the starboard line. Presently in obedience to a signal the ships altered helm and settled down on their former course, the large steamer following suit, although dropping steadily astern, for her speed was considerably less than that of the transports.

Presently the ship's officer returned. As he passed Wilmshurst stopped him, enquiring whether anything had developed.

"The *Ponto* has cold feet," explained the *Zungeru's* officer. "Her Old Man seems to be under the impression that there is a Hun scuttling around, so he's signalled for permission to tail on

to us. The cruiser offered no objection, provided the speed of the convoy is unaffected, so by daylight the tramp will be hull-down, I expect."

"Much ado about nothing," remarked Laxdale. "I say, old man, let's turn in again. What's the matter with you?"

He grasped Wilmshurst by the arm. The subaltern, apparently heedless of the touch, was gazing fixedly at the tramp. The mercantile officer and Laxdale both followed the direction of his look, the former giving vent to a low whistle.

From above the gunwale of a boat stowed amidships on the *Ponto* a feeble light glimmered.

"Help—German raider," it signalled.

"You read it?" enquired the sailor hurriedly, as if to confirm the evidence of his own eyes.

"Yes," replied Wilmshurst, and repeated the signal.

Without another word the *Zungeru's* officer turned and raced to the bridge. In a few moments the signal was passed on to the *Tompion* by means of a flashlamp, the rays of which were invisible save from the direction of the receiver.

"Very good," was the cruiser's reply. "Carry on."

A little later the general order was flashed in to the convoy. "Increase speed to seventeen knots."

The instructions were promptly carried out as far as the

transports were concerned, but from the *Ponto* came a signal: "Am doing my maximum speed. Must drop astern if speed of convoy is not reduced."

"The blighter has got hold of the code all right," remarked Laxdale. "We'll wait and see the fun. Wonder why we are whacking up speed?"

"The cruiser wants to get the transports out of harm's way, I should imagine," replied Wilmshurst. "By Jove, it's rummy how news spreads. The whole mess is coming on deck."

The arrival of the colonel and almost all the other officers in various "fancy rig" proved the truth of Dudley's remark. Armed with field glasses, marine-glasses, and telescopes the officers gathered aft, dividing their attention between the labouring *Ponto* and the greyhound *Tompion*.

In about an hour the tramp had dropped astern to the distance of a little over five miles, but was still maintaining a course parallel to that of the convoy, while the escorting cruiser was still zig-zagging across the bows of the leading transports.

Presently the *Tompion* turned sharply to starboard, steering westward for quite two miles before she shaped a course exactly opposite to that of the convoy, signalling the while to the *Ponto*, asking various, almost commonplace questions regarding her speed and coal-consumption.

It was merely a ruse to lull suspicion. With every gun manned and torpedoes launched home the cruiser flung about until she was bows on to the stern of the tramp. Then came the

decided mandate: "Heave-to and send a boat."

Unable to bring more than three guns to bear astern the Hun raider—for such the so-called *Ponto* was—ported helm, her speed increasing rapidly. Almost at the same time a six-inch gun sent a shell perilously close to the weather side of the cruiser's fore-bridge.

Before the raider could fire a second time three shells struck her close to the stern-post, literally pulverising the whole of the poop. The after six-inch gun, which had been concealed under a dummy deck-house, was blown from its mountings, the heavy weapon crashing through the shattered decks to the accompaniment of a shower of splinters and a dense pall of flame-tinged smoke.

It was more than the Huns bargained for. Knowing that the British cruiser was already aware of the presence of a number of prisoners on board the raider counted on the *Tompion* withholding her fire. The *Ponto* would then "crack on speed," for in spite of her alleged maximum of eleven knots she was capable of working up to twenty-eight, or a knot more than the speed of the cruiser under forced draught. These hopes were nipped in the bud by the *Tompion* blowing away the *Ponto's* stern and putting both propellers out of action.

Of subsequent events immediately following the brief action Wilmshurst and his brother officers saw little. Their whole attention was directed towards their men, for the Haussas, on hearing the gun-fire, impetuously made a rush on deck—not by reason of panic but out of the deep curiosity that is ever to the fore in the minds of West African natives to a far greater extent

than in the case of Europeans.

Next morning the *Ponto* was nowhere to be seen. She had foundered within two hours of the engagement, while two hundred of her officers and crew were prisoners of war on board the *Tompion*, and a hundred and twenty British subjects, mostly the crews of vessels taken and sunk by the raider, found themselves once more under the banner of liberty—the White Ensign.

During the course of the day Wilmshurst heard the salient facts in connection with the raider's career. She was the Hamburg-Amerika intermediate liner *Porfurst*, who, after being armed and camouflaged, had contrived to escape the cordon of patrol-boats in the North Atlantic. For three months she had followed her piratical occupation, re-provisioning and re-coaling from the vessels she captured. Whenever her prisoners grew in number sufficiently to cause inconvenience the *Porfurst* spared one of her prizes for the purpose of landing the captives in some remote port.

It was by a pure fluke that the raider ran almost blindly under the guns of the *Tompion*. Under the impression that the convoy consisted of unescorted merchantmen the *Porfurst* steamed athwart their track, and slowing down to eleven or twelve knots, awaited the arrival of a likely prey.

Finding too late that the convoy was not so impotent as at first appearance the kapitan of the *Porfurst* attempted a daring ruse. Upon being challenged by the cruiser he gave the vessel's name as *Ponto*, the real craft having been sunk by the raider only two days previously. The Hun stood a chance of dropping

astern and slipping away but for the furtive and timely warning signalled by a young apprentice, who, contriving to creep unobserved into one of the boats, made good use of a small electric torch which he had managed to retain.

Enquiries of the released prisoners resulted in the information that they had been treated by their captors in a far better manner than the Huns generally deal with those unfortunate individuals who fall into their hands. The kapitan of the *Porfurst* was no exception to the usual run of Germans. It was the possibility of capture—which had developed into a certainty—that had influenced him in his treatment of the crews of the sunk ships. Only the fear of just reprisals kept him within the bounds of civilized warfare, and having behaved in an ostentatiously proper manner towards the prisoners he received in return honourable treatment on board the *Tompion*.

When the convoy was within two days' sail of Table Bay another convoy was sighted steering north, while wireless orders were received for the *Tompion* to escort the homeward bound ships and let the transports "carry on" under the protection of two destroyers sent from Simon's Town.

Upon receipt of these orders the captain of the cruiser signalled the *Zungeru*, asking her to receive on board the released crews of the sunk ships and to land them at Table Bay. Although wondering why the men should be set ashore at the Cape instead of being taken back to England the master of the transport offered no objection, and preparations were made to tranship the ex-prisoners.

Knowing several officers of the mercantile marine,

Wilmshurst strolled into the *Zungeru's* ship's office and asked the purser's clerk to let him have a look at the list of supernumeraries. There was a chance that some of his acquaintances might be amongst the released prisoners now on board the transport.

As far as the officers' names were concerned Dudley "drew blank." He was on the point of handing the type-written list back to the purser's clerk when he noticed a few names written in red ink—three civilians who had been taking passages in ships that had fallen victims to the raider *Porfurst*.

"MacGregor—Robert; of Umfuli, Rhodesia—that's remarkable," thought Wilmshurst. "That's the name of Rupert's chum. Wonder if it's the same man? There may be dozens of MacGregors in Rhodesia; I'll see if I can get in touch with this MacGregor."

That same afternoon the Rhodesian was pointed out to Dudley by the third mate as he strolled into the smoking-room.

Robert MacGregor was a man of about thirty-eight or forty, tall, raw-boned and with curling hair that had a decided auburn hue. In the absence of any description of Rupert's chum, Dudley had no idea of what he was like, and until he approached this MacGregor his curiosity was not likely to be satisfied.

"Excuse me," began Wilmshurst. "I believe your name is Robert MacGregor?"

The Rhodesian, without showing any surprise at the subaltern's question, merely nodded. A man who has lived

practically alone for years in the wilds is not usually ready with his tongue.

"Did you ever run across a man called Wilmshurst—Rupert Wilmshurst?" continued Dudley. "He's my brother, you know," he added by way of explanation.

"Yes," replied MacGregor slowly. "He was a chum of mine."

CHAPTER IV

SPOFFORTH, MACGREGOR, AND THE LIONESS

Robert MacGregor pulled a pipe from his pocket and leisurely filled it with Boer tobacco. His slow, deliberate way contrasted forcibly with Wilmshurst's quick, incisive manner; his slow dialect would have irritated the subaltern beyond measure but for the fact that he guessed the Rhodesian to be of Scots descent.

Dudley noticed particularly that MacGregor had referred to his brother in the past tense. It sounded ominous.

"Was a chum?" he repeated with an accent on the first word.

"In a sense, yes," replied MacGregor. "We went for a couple of trips into German East. The last time was just before the war. You know why we went?"

"It was in connection with a hidden store of ammunition, I believe," replied Wilmshurst.

The Rhodesian nodded slowly, puffing steadily at his pipe.

"Rupert found a mare's nest, I fancy," he continued. "At any rate, before we made any really important discoveries I had to go back to Jo'burg. Had no option, so to speak. Then, in connection with the same business, I penetrated into German South-West Africa. I was in Bersheba for nearly a fortnight before I heard that war had broken out, and the first intimation

I had was being put under arrest and sent up country to Windhoek.

"When Botha overrun the colony I was released and offered a sound job at Walfisch Bay—fairly important Government appointment in connection with the distilling plant. That completed I thought I'd trek back to Rhodesia and do a bit in German East. Thinking I would do the trip round quicker by sea I took passage on the *Ibex*, a tramp of about two thousand tons, and within twelve hours of leaving Walfisch Bay the boat was captured by the *Porfurst*."

"I hope I'm not tiring you with too many questions," said Wilmshurst after he had made several enquiries respecting his brother. The answers received were far from satisfactory, for MacGregor seemed to make a point of "switching off" the subject of Rupert Wilmshurst and dwelling at length on his own adventures.

"Not at all," replied the Rhodesian. "As regards your brother you may get in touch with him, but German East is a whacking big country. Are you part of a brigade?" he asked.

"We're just the 'Waffs,'" replied Dudley. "The West African Field Force, you know. As regards numbers or our scene of action I haven't the remotest idea at present. I don't believe that even the colonel knows."

"At any rate," continued MacGregor, "I think I'll see your colonel and get him to let me proceed in the *Zungeru*. It doesn't very much matter whether I join the Rhodesian contingent, although I'd prefer to, or get attached to one of the Boer

detachments, or even your crush, if they'd have me. I don't want to brag, Mr. Wilmshurst, but I'd be mighty useful, knowing the country as I do."

MacGregor's application met with favourable consideration, although he did not tell Wilmshurst the result of the interview with the colonel until the transports dropped anchor in Table Bay and the rest of the released men went ashore.

Bad weather off Cape Agulhas made the rounding of the southernmost part of Africa a disagreeable business, but in ideal climatic conditions the convoy, with two destroyers still on escort duties, approached Cape Delgado, beyond which the territory of German East commences.

The short tropical dusk was deepening into night when two tramp steamers were sighted, bearing N.N.E. In obedience to a signal from one of the destroyers they revealed themselves as two Dutch trading ships bound from Batavia to Rotterdam, but driven out of their course by a succession of gales at the commencement of the south-west monsoon.

Commanded to heave-to both vessels were boarded by examination officers from the destroyer, but their papers being quite in order and nothing of a suspicious nature discovered amongst the cargo they were allowed to proceed.

At daybreak the convoy learnt that both vessels had been shelled and destroyed by a British cruiser, but not in time to prevent them landing two batteries of 4.1 inch Krupp field-guns at the mouth of the Mohoro river.

"Rough luck those vessels slipping through the blockade

like that," commented Spofforth. "Those guns are as good as a couple of battalions of Askaris to the Huns."

"Never mind," rejoined Danvers. "It'll put a bit of heart into Fritz and make him buck up. That'll give us a chance of smelling powder."

"Perhaps," said Wilmshurst. "I heard the major say that field artillery was more of a drag than a benefit to the Boers in the South African War. It destroyed their mobility to a great extent, and not until we had captured most of the guns did the Boer start proper guerilla tactics—and you know how long that lasted."

"Hanged if I want to go foot-slogging the whole length and breadth of German East," commented Danvers. "I'd rather tackle a dozen batteries than tramp for a twelve-month on end. So this is that delightful spot, Kilwa?"

He pointed to a long, low-lying expanse of land, covered with trees. Away to the northward the ground rose, forming a plateau of coral nearly fifty feet above the sea, and on which many huge baobab trees were growing. The shores surrounding the harbour were low and covered with mangroves, but in and out could be discerned several lofty hills. Here and there could be seen isolated native huts, while at the head of the harbour clustered the thatch and tin-roofed houses of the German settlement, which had for several months been in British occupation.

With their systematic thoroughness the Huns had vastly improved the health of the hitherto miasmic-infested port,

following the principles adopted by the Americans during the construction of the Panama Canal. Consequently much of the terrors of the fever-stricken port of Kilwa in by-gone days had disappeared, and with the continuance of ordinary precautions the place offered a suitable base for the columns about to operate between the Mohoro and Rovuma rivers.

Without undue delay the Waffs were disembarked and sent under canvas on fairly high ground at some distance from the harbour. For the next week intense activity prevailed, the men being strenuously subjected to the acclimatising process, while the horses and mules had to be carefully watched lest the deadly sleeping-sickness should make its appearance at the commencement of the operations and thus place the troops under severe disadvantages.

The officers, too, were not spared. Drills and parades over they had to attend lectures, tactical problems having to be worked out by the aid of military maps.

These maps, based upon German surveys, were the most accurate obtainable, but even then they left much to be desired. Subsequent knowledge of the country showed that frequently roads and native paths were indicated that had no actual existence, while on the other hand passable tracks were discovered that were not shown on the maps. More than likely the wily Huns allowed what were presumed to be official maps to fall into the hands of the British, having taken particular care to make them misleading. It was but one of many examples of the way in which Germany prepared for war not only in Europe but in her territorial appendages beyond the sea.

MacGregor landed with the troops and was given a semi-official position as scout and attached to the same battalion to which Wilmshurst belonged. Gradually his taciturnity diminished, until he developed into a fairly communicative individual and was generally popular with the Mess.

During the stay in camp at Kilwa Wilmshurst, Danvers, Spofforth and Laxdale snatched the opportunity of going on a lion-hunting expedition, MacGregor on their invitation accompanying them.

Taking .303 Service rifles, for which a supply of notched bullets was provided (for game shooting purposes only these terribly destructive missiles are allowable), and with Sergt. Bela Moshi and half a dozen Haussas as attendants the five men left Kilwa camp at about two hours before sunset.

An hour and ten minutes' ride brought them to a native village where several lions had been terrorising the inhabitants by their nocturnal depredations. Here the horses were left under the charge of one of the Haussas, and the party set out on foot into the bush.

"Think we'll have any luck, MacGregor?" asked Laxdale. "Hanged if I want to spend all night lugging a rifle about without the chance of a shot."

The Rhodesian smiled dourly. He knew the supreme optimism of amateur huntsmen and the general disinclination of the King of Beasts to be holed by a bullet.

"Unless a lion is ravenously hungry he will not put in an appearance," he replied. "Of course we might strike his spoor

and follow him up. We'll see what luck we get when the moon rises."

For some distance the party travelled in silence. With the darkness a halt was called, for until the bush was flooded with the strong moonlight further progress was almost impossible.

Away on the right, at not so very great a distance, came the bleat of a goat, while further away still could be heard the awe-inspiring roar of the lions after their prey.

"Hanged if I like the idea of those huge brutes leaping right upon us," whispered Spofforth. "I, being the tallest of the crush, will be sure to bear the brunt of his leap."

Spofforth was the giant of the battalion, standing six feet four inches in his socks, and proportionately broad of shoulder and massive of limb. At the last regimental sports he carried off the running, long-jump and hurdle events, while as a boxer and a wrestler he was a match for most men, yet he expressed his fears with all sincerity, inwardly wishing for the rising of the moon.

The Haussas, too, were far from comfortable. Had they their wish they would have lighted a roaring fire, one of the most effective though not infallible means of keeping wild animals at bay.

The fifty minutes' halt in the desolate bush terminated when the deep orange-hued orb of night rose above the distant sea. As the shadows shortened the trek was resumed, each man keeping his loaded rifle ready for instant use.

Before they had gone two hundred yards, following a native path on which the spoor of a couple of lions was distinctly visible, Laxdale suddenly disappeared, while Wilmshurst, who was walking hard on his heels, was only just able to save himself from following his example.

Followed a great commotion in which the luckless subaltern's shouts mingled with the terrified bleating of a goat.

"Help us out, you fellows," cried Laxdale in desperation. "I've a whole menagerie for company by the feel of it."

"You'll scare every lion within five miles of us, laddie," expostulated MacGregor, kneeling at the edge of the pitfall and peering into the darkness within.

With the assistance of his electric torch Wilmshurst made the discovery that the trap was a hole of about twelve feet in depth and about the same distance in length. In breadth it overlapped the path, its presence being skilfully concealed by branches of trees overlaid with broad leaves on which earth had been thrown and lightly pressed so as to give it the appearance of part of the beaten track. In the floor of the pit pointed stakes had been driven, but fortunately Laxdale had fallen between them and thus escaped being impaled. His sole companion was a goat that, left without food and water, was to act as a decoy to the lions. Evidently the pitfall had been recently dug, otherwise the spoor of the beasts would not be visible on both sides of it.

"Dash the villagers!" exclaimed Spofforth impetuously. "Why the deuce didn't the headsman give us warning of the

beastly trap? Here, Bela Moshi, cut a couple of young trees and knock up a ladder. Cheer-o, Laxdale, dear boy. Just try and imagine you've found the better 'ole."

"Imagination goes a long way," retaliated the imprisoned sub., "but you just jump down and put your suggestion to the practical test. I believe I'm being chawn up by white ants, and I'm certain that the jiggers are already tackling my toes."

Promptly Bela Moshi set the Haussas to work, and a rough-and-ready ladder having been constructed, Laxdale, little the worse for his unexpected tumble, was released from the pitfall.

The journey was resumed. Contrary to MacGregor's assertion the lions had not been frightened away, for their deep, characteristic roar could be heard with greater distinctness than before, although they were a good distance away.

MacGregor looked like proving a true prophet, however, for after following a fresh spoor for miles the hunters drew blank. At the edge of a pool of stagnant water the tracks ended abruptly.

"I don't fancy that water-hole," said Wilmshurst. "It savours of mosquitoes and other pests. How goes the time?"

Danvers consulted his wristlet watch.

"Nearly four o'clock," he announced. "If we are to be in camp by eight we'll have to look slippy."

A rustling sound in the grass within a few yards of the spot

where the hunters were standing attracted their attention. With rifles ready to open fire they waited. They could see the coarse tufts waving in the moonlight.

"Stand by!" exclaimed Wilmshurst, handing his rifle to Bela Moshi, and before his companions could grasp the situation the subaltern plunged into the grass, made a sudden dash, and was back with a healthy young lion cub in his arms.

"We've bagged something, at all events," he remarked triumphantly. "The little beggar got adrift, I suppose."

"What are you going to do with it, old man?" asked Spofforth facetiously. "Use it as a decoy or train it to guard your kit in camp?"

"Just as likely as not the cub will act as a decoy," said Laxdale. "Let the little brute yap a bit."

"He's yapping quite enough as it is," rejoined Wilmshurst. "Hanged if we can hear anything with that noise. I hope you fellows are keeping on the alert?"

"MacGregor's doing that," replied Danvers, indicating the silent form of the Rhodesian, as he stood motionless as a statue, with his rifle ready for instant use.

"Hear anything, MacGregor?" enquired Spofforth.

The man shook his head.

"Thought I did," he replied, "but I must have been mistaken."

Giving the cub into the care of Bela Moshi, Wilmshurst followed his companions as they tramped in single file along the narrow bush track, the Haussas tailing on to the end of the procession.

The edge of the bush was almost reached when Laxdale, with a splendid shot at a hundred and twenty yards, brought down a large panther. A halt was made while the blacks skinned the dead beast, for in practically waterless districts panther-skin is a valuable aid to the efficiency of a Maxim gun. Soaked in water, wrapped round the jacket of the weapon, the evaporation keeps the gun cooler for a longer time than if the water within the jacket alone were used.

Upon coming within sight of the camp the white men were able to walk side by side in comparatively open country.

MacGregor, Laxdale, and Danvers were on ahead, Spofforth and Wilmshurst about fifty paces behind, Bela Moshi with the cub was close on Dudley's heels, while the Haussas with the dead panther were some distance in the rear, the blacks carrying the officers' rifles since the hunters were clear of the bush.

"I'll take the cub," said Wilmshurst, noticing that the native sergeant was stumbling frequently as he carefully nursed the somewhat fretful animal.

"Berry good, sah," replied Bela Moshi, handing the cub to the subaltern. "I tink, sah, dat——"

A chorus of yells and warning shouts from the Haussas made the officers turn pretty sharply. What they saw was

something that they had badly wanted to see but at the present moment had not the faintest desire to meet.

Leaping with prodigious bounds across the flat ground was an enormous lioness. The devoted beast had followed her cub for miles, her instinct telling her that when the men halted her opportunity would come to recover the little animal. A lioness bereft of her cubs has been known to follow hunters for days in order either to recover or revenge her offspring. The sight of the large camp, however, must have incited the gigantic feline to premature action.

Of the five white men only MacGregor retained his rifle. Laxdale and Danvers took to their heels, making for a large baobab that stood about fifty yards away. Strange to relate, MacGregor followed suit, thrusting a clip of cartridges into the magazine of his rifle as he ran. Wilmshurst, hampered by the cub, stood stock still, fascinated by the awesome sight of the approaching lioness.

Ten yards in front of Wilmshurst stood Spofforth, swaying gently on his toes, his bulky figure thrown slightly forward and his arms outstretched.

"Run for it!" he exclaimed in a high-pitched, unnatural voice, but without turning his head.

Wilmshurst disobeyed—for one thing he was unable to tear himself away; his feet seemed rooted to the ground. For another, a sense of camaraderie urged him to remain an impassive spectator of the impending struggle between an unarmed man, who had voluntarily interposed his big bulk

between the hampered subaltern and the infuriated animal.

The lioness, roaring loudly, leapt. Spofforth closed just as her forepaws touched the ground, and the next instant man and beast were engaged in a terrible struggle.

The powerful officer clutched the lioness just below the jaws with both hands, holding her in a vice-like grip. With his feet dug firmly, into the ground he held, swaying to and fro but not giving an inch while the cruel talons of the ferocious beast were lacerating his arms from shoulder to wrist.

Exerting every ounce of strength Spofforth bore down, striving to fracture the terrible jaws. Once the lioness succeeded in dealing him a blow with her paw that, but for the protection afforded by his double pith helmet would have brained the man. For a few seconds Spofforth reeled, his head-gear fell to the ground, leaving his skull unprotected should the lioness repeat the terrifically powerful stroke; yet not for a moment did his grip release.

Through an eddying cloud of dust raised by the struggle Wilmshurst watched the unequal conflict, until his will-power overcoming the initial stages of hypnotic impotence, he threw the cub to the ground and drew his knife.

With a sensation akin to that of a mild-tempered individual who essays with his bare hands to separate two large and ferocious dogs engaged in combat Wilmshurst edged towards the flank of the lioness with the intention of hamstringing the tensioned sinews of her hind legs.

Before he could deliver the stroke Bela Moshi grasped his

officer by the shoulders and unceremoniously jerked him aside; then lifting a rifle to his shoulders the Haussa sergeant pressed the trigger.

Down in a convulsive heap fell Spofforth and the lioness, the brute frantically pawing both her antagonist and the dust in her death agonies. Then with a sharp shudder the animal stretched herself and died, while the subaltern, utterly exhausted, lay inertly upon the ground, his rent sleeve stained with still spreading dark patches.

By that time Laxdale and Danvers were upon the scene. Temporary bandages were applied to Spofforth's ugly-looking wounds, while the greatly concerned Haussas improvised a litter made of rifles and coats. Upon this the badly-mauled subaltern was placed and the journey resumed towards the camp, the dead lioness and her very much alive cub being carried in as trophies of the night's work.

"Where's MacGregor?" asked Wilmshurst.

Laxdale and Danvers exchanged enquiring glances.

"Hanged if I know," said the former. "The last I saw of him was when he was making for the baobab. We were a set of blighters scooting off and leaving old Spofforth to act like a modern Horatius."

All three subalterns knew that the Rhodesian was the only man on the spot who had a rifle ready, yet generously they forbore to give expression to their thoughts.

"See if you can find Mr. MacGregor," ordered Wilmshurst,

addressing Bela Moshi.

"Me go, sah," replied the sergeant, and promptly he set off towards the baobab, keeping his eyes fixed upon the ground.

Arriving at the tree Bela Moshi rested his rifle against the trunk and with the agility of a cat swarmed up to one of the lowermost branches. Both Laxdale and Danvers could see that it was a different part of the tree from that in which they had taken refuge.

Crouching on the enormous limb Bela Moshi remained motionless for a few moments—a patch of huddled black and khaki hardly distinguishable from the sun-baked bark. Then he dropped lightly to the ground and by a movement of his arms signalled to some of the Haussas to approach.

"By Jove, Bela Moshi's found him!" exclaimed Danvers, and the three subalterns hurried to the spot.

It was MacGregor they saw, lying face downwards on a bed of dried grass. The Rhodesian was unconscious, but on examination no trace of an injury could be found. In his panic he had succeeded in climbing the tree as far as the lowermost branch and had been seized with a sudden faintness.

While the three officers were bending over him MacGregor opened his eyes. Gradually their haunted expression gave place to a look of bewilderment, until he realised that he was surrounded by friends.

"By smoke!" he ejaculated. "I had cold feet with a vengeance—and before a lot of niggers, too."

"So did we—that is, Danvers and I were in a mortal hurry to get out of the way of the lioness," rejoined Laxdale. "Good old Spofforth bore the brunt of it, and he's badly mauled."

"Is that so?" asked MacGregor. "I am sorry. It's a bad beginning, this running away business. I only hope the colonel and the others won't take it badly."

"Don't worry, old chap," said Danvers. "Feeling fit to foot it? Good. We've got to get Spofforth back as quickly as possible."

Walking with difficulty MacGregor managed to keep pace with the three officers, and presently the rough-and-ready stretcher was overtaken. Upon arriving at the camp the medical staff were soon busy, with the result that the wounds of the injured hunter were properly dressed.

"Not so serious as at first sight," declared the senior medical officer. "Unless complications set in he'll be fit in a month, but he'll carry the scars all his life."

CHAPTER V

HOW THE KOPJE WAS STORMED

A few days later the battalion left Kilwa for the scene of action, a strong force of Germans being located by seaplane reconnaissance twenty miles north of the Rovuma River and nearly four times that distance from the coast.

Acting in conjunction with three battalions of the Waffs were a mounted Boer contingent and a Punjabi regiment that had already done good service in the northern part of the hostile colony, while three seaplanes were "attached" to the expedition for reconnoitring purposes.

In high spirits the Waffs marched out of camp, eager for the chance of a scrap. The only malcontents were half-a-dozen hospital cases who perforce had to be left behind; amongst them, to his great disgust, Second Lieutenant Spofforth, who though convalescent was unable to bluff the doctor that his arm was "quite all right—doesn't inconvenience me in the least, don't you know."

At the end of four days' hard marching through scrubby grounds the troops began to climb the almost trackless hinterland, where water was scarce and vegetation scanty. It was much of the same nature as the veldt in the dry season, kopjes being plentifully in evidence. There were unpleasant traces of Fritz and his native auxiliaries, for several of the springs had been systematically poisoned and cunningly-constructed booby-traps were frequently encountered.

Nevertheless all arms were sanguine of bringing the Huns to bay. Strong Belgian forces operating from the westward were driving the enemy towards the advancing British, while across the Rovuma Portuguese troops, well supplied with light field-artillery, were considered a bar to any attempted "break-through" on the southern frontier.

Towards evening scouts reported the "spoor" of the enemy, for the ground bore the impression of thousands of naked footprints and those of about a hundred booted men. A strong force of German Askaris, supported by a "white" body of troops with machine guns and mule batteries, were retiring in a north-westerly direction, while a small detachment had broken off and was making almost north-east.

It was against the latter party that the Nth Waffs were to operate, since it was recognised that a small, mobile, and determined body of the enemy would give almost if not quite as much trouble as a large and consequently more cumbersome force hampered with guns in a difficult country.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Wilmshurst, as a couple of Haussa scouts hurriedly and stealthily rejoined the advance guard. "Tarry Barrel and Spot Cash have tumbled upon something."

"Hun he lib for stop, sah," reported Tari Barl.

"Stopping to make fight?" asked the subaltern eagerly.

The Haussa shook his head, and moved his jaw after the manner of a person eating.

"Lib for stop for grub," he exclaimed. "After that on him

go."

"How far?" demanded Wilmshurst.

Tari Barl indicated that the scouts had followed two distinct spoors for more than a couple of miles without actually sighting any of the retiring enemy.

Acting upon this information the advance guard marched into the ground on which the Huns had recently halted. Examination of the refuse and other traces revealed the fact that the enemy had been there but a few hours previously, for the ashes of the extinguished fires were still hot. That the march had been resumed in a leisurely manner, showing that as yet the hostile detachment was unaware of the close pursuit, was evident by the systematic way in which the fires had been put out and earth thrown lightly over the embers.

"We'll halt just beyond this spot," decided the company major, when the rest of the four platoons joined the advance guard. "Hanged if I fancy bivouacking on the site of a Boche camp. What do you think of the fresh spoors, MacGregor?"

"That's the principal line of retreat, I think," replied the Rhodesian. "They can't go very much farther, for it will be pitch black in twenty minutes."'

"Just so," agreed the major. "Set the men to work, Mr. Wilmshurst. Mr. Laxdale, you will please send a runner to the colonel and tell him that we've proposed bivouacking here till dawn."

Until it was quite dark the Haussas toiled, building sangars

and constructing light connecting trenches with abattis of sharp thorns sufficient to deter and hold up a rush of bare-footed Askaris, since there was no knowing that after all the enemy had been informed of the presence of the pursuing column.

In silence the men ate their rations, no fires being allowed, and sentries to outlying piquets having been posted, the troops slept beside their piled arms.

"What do you think of our chance of overtaking the bounders?" enquired Wilmshurst of MacGregor, as the former prepared to visit the sentries.

"We ought to surprise them just after dawn," replied the Rhodesian. "I'm just off to see the major and get his permission to try and discover their position."

"But it's pitch dark," remarked Dudley. "You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Man, you'd be bushed for a dead cert."

"I don't know so much about that," replied MacGregor confidently. "The fellows up at Umfuli often used to chaff me, saying that I had eyes like a cat. Believe I have. At any rate I'll risk it, and if I'm not back an hour before dawn my name's not MacGregor."

"Let me know if the major agrees," said Wilmshurst. "I don't want my sentries to take pot shots at you when you return—and they are all jolly good marksmen," he added in a tone of pride, for he had good reason to pin his faith upon the Haussas' accuracy with a rifle.

It was not long before MacGregor returned.

"Fixed it up all right," he announced, "and now I'm off. If, just before dawn, you hear the cry of a gnu you'll know it's this johnny returning, so please keep the sentries well in hand."

The subaltern accompanied the Rhodesian past the alert sentries; then, with Wilmshurst's good wishes for the best of luck, MacGregor vanished into the night. In vain the young officer strained his ears to catch the faint noise of the Rhodesian's footsteps or the crackle of a dry twig under the pressure of his boot, but not a sound did the scout give of his progress.

"Hanged if I'd like to take on his job," soliloquised Dudley, as he slowly felt his way to the next pair of sentries. "I'd have a shot at it if I were told off for it, of course, but this darkness seems to have weight—to press upon a fellow's eyes. S'pose it'll end in having to send out parties to bring the fellow in."

Truth to tell, Wilmshurst was not particularly keen on his brother's chum. Why, he could hardly explain. It might have had something to do with MacGregor's conduct when the lioness charged. But since then the Rhodesian had shown considerable pluck and grit, and his voluntary offer to plunge into the bush on a pitch dark night was a great factor in his favour, in Dudley's opinion.

The subaltern's soliloquy was cut short by the dull glint of steel within a few inches of his chest—even in the darkness all bayonets seem to possess self-contained luminosity—and a voice hissed, "Who come?"

Reassuring the sentries—there were two at each post—Wilmshurst received the report that everything was all correct.

"Macgreg, him go," declared one of the Haussas, Macgreg being the name by which the Rhodesian was known to the black troops.

Wilmshurst was astonished. He had heard nothing of the scout's movements, yet the sentry, fifty yards away, had declared quite blandly that MacGregor had passed the outlying post.

"How do you know that, Brass Pot?" asked the subaltern.

The Haussa chuckled audibly, and holding his rifle obliquely with the bayonet thrust into the ground, placed his ear to the butt.

"Macgreg him go and go," he answered, meaning that the Rhodesian was still on the move.

In vain Wilmshurst tested the sound-conducting properties of the rifle. Normally of good hearing he failed to detect what to Private Brass Pot was an accepted and irrefutable fact.

"Very good," said the subaltern, without admitting his failure. "If you hear foot of Macgreg come this way before sergeant come for reliefs then you send and tell me. Savvy?"

"Berry good, sah," replied the Haussa.

Having twice visited the sentries Wilmshurst returned to the bivouac to snatch a few hours' sleep. It seemed as if he had

only just dozed off when he was awakened by Sergeant Bela Moshi, who informed him that the men were already standing to and that the brief tropical dawn was stealing across the sky.

"Has Macgreg returned, Bela Moshi?" asked Wilmshurst, stretching his cramped limbs, for he had not removed his boots during the last forty-eight hours, and with the exception of a brief interval had been on his feet practically the whole of that time.

"MacGregor?" exclaimed Laxdale, who happened to overhear his brother-officer's question. "Yes—rather. It seems that he struck our main camp about an hour or so ago. The colonel's sent to say that we are to attempt an enveloping movement. The Boches are in force on a kopje about five miles on our right front—about eight hundred of 'em according to MacGregor's report."

"That's good," declared Wilmshurst. All the same he felt rather sceptical. The spoor of the right-hand column of the retiring Huns hardly bore out the Rhodesian's statement, but evidently the scout knew his business.

"Is MacGregor accompanying us?" he asked, as the three subalterns prepared to rejoin their respective platoons.

"Fancy not," replied Danvers. "He's pretty well done up, I imagine. The scrub's a bit thick out there, and a fellow can't crawl far without picking up a few thorns. Plucky blighter, what?"

"A" Company was to work round to the right of the hostile position, "B" operating to the left, both having two hours' start

of the remainder of the battalion, which was to deliver a frontal attack simultaneously with the flanking movement.

With the night-mists still hanging in dense patches over the scrub tactics were resumed. Wilmshurst had good reason to be delighted with his men as the scouts and advance guards slipped off to their detailed positions. At a hundred yards they were lost to sight and sound, threading their way with the utmost caution through the long grass like experienced hunters stalking their prey, while the various units kept well in touch with each other by means of reliable runners. Other methods of communication were out of the question. Flag-waving and heliograph would have "given the show away" with the utmost certainty.

All feelings of physical tiredness vanishing under the magic spell of impending action, Wilmshurst led his extended platoon toward their allotted positions. It was slow work. The ground was difficult; every spot likely to afford concealment to a hostile sniper had to be carefully examined. The absence of bird life was ominous. It meant that either the returning Huns had disturbed the feathered denizens or else the advance of the Haussas had driven them over the enemy position, in which case the wily Hun would "smell a rat."

It was noon before Wilmshurst gained his preliminary objective. The tropical sun was beating down with terrific violence, the scrub offering scant shelter from its scorching rays. Already the previously-dew-sodden ground was baked stone-hard, the radiating heat imparting an appearance of motion to every object within sight.

Literally stewing, the subaltern threw himself flat on the ground under the slight shadow of a dried thorn bush, and waited, at intervals sweeping the bare outlines of the kopje with his prismatic glasses.

Thirty long drawn-out minutes passed. According to plan the enveloping movement ought to have been completed an hour ago, but not a sign was given that "B" Company had arrived at their position—a sun-baked donga at a distance of fifteen hundred yards behind the kopje.

Up crept Bela Moshi, his ebony features distended in a most cheerful looking grin.

"Hun him lib for sit down, sah!" he reported. "Five Bosh-bosh (his rendering of the word Boche) an' heap Askari—say so many."

He opened and closed his fingers of both hands four times, meaning that the hostile post consisted of five Germans and forty native troops.

"They saw you?" asked the subaltern.

"Dem no look," replied the sergeant. "Too much busy make eat."

"How far away?"

"One tousand yards, sah," declared Bela Moshi.

Writing his report on a leaf of his pocketbook Wilmshurst gave the paper to Tari Barl with instructions to deliver it to the

company commander.

Quickly the major's reply was received. The hostile post was to be surrounded, but no action taken until the order was given for the concentrated rush upon the Huns holding the kopje.

As rapidly as due caution allowed the enveloping of the outpost was completed. From his new position, less than four hundred yards from the spot where the unsuspecting Huns were bivouacking, Wilmshurst could keep them under close observation.

Three of the Germans were middle-aged men, bearded, swarthy, and dressed in coffee-coloured cotton uniform, sun helmets and gum boots. The other two were quite young men, whose attention, despite the heat, was mainly directed towards the Askaris. Evidently some of the stores had gone adrift, for the young Huns were browbeating a number of natives, punctuating their forcible remarks by liberal applications of their schamboks, while their elders looked on in stolid but unqualified approval.

"Dem make for one-time good shot, sah!" whispered Bela Moshi, calmly setting the backsight of his rifle. "Blow Bosh-bosh him head-bone inside out an' him not know anyting."

"Go steady, Bela Moshi," cautioned the subaltern. "Pass the word for the men to fire one volley over their heads—but not before I give orders—and then rush them with the bayonet. We want them alive, remember."

A whistle rang out faintly away on the left. The call was repeated much nearer, while distinct blasts rose through the

heated air. It was the signal for the advance.

Almost as soon as Wilmshurst put his whistle to his lips a crisp volley from the rifles of his platoon rent the welkin, then with fierce shouts the khaki-clad, barefooted Waffs leapt to their feet, their bayonets glittering in the sun.

At first, too utterly astonished to realise that they were hopelessly trapped and outnumbered, the Huns stood stock still, gazing stupidly at the converging ring of steel. The Askaris for the most part attempted to bolt, but finding their retreat cut off, grovelled in the dust.

"Hands up!" shouted Wilmshurst.

The three bearded Huns obeyed promptly and meekly. Of the others one held up his arms with sullen reluctance, his flabby face distorted with rage. The fifth, dropping on one knee, picked up a rifle and levelled it at the on-rushing British officer.

"The fellow's showing pluck, by Jove!" was the thought that flashed through Dudley's mind. Like all brave men he admired courage even in a foe. The fact that running over rough ground and firing a revolver at fifty yards did not give him much chance against a steadily held rifle entered into his calculations.

Before the Hun could press trigger a score of rifles spoke. The Waffs, on seeing their young officer's danger, took no chances, and the German, his head and chest riddled with bullets, toppled over stone dead upon the ground. As he fell his fingers closed convulsively against the trigger of his rifle and

the bullet intended for Wilmshurst sung past the subaltern's left ear.

A loud yell from the other young Hun proclaimed the fact that he, too, was hit. A bullet fired at the resisting German had been deflected, passing through the fleshy part of his comrade's left arm. It was hard luck on a surrendered prisoner, but on these occasions luck, both good and bad, crops up at every available opportunity.

"Sorry, Fritz," exclaimed Wilmshurst apologetically. "Accident, you know."

There was no time for explanation. Directing a Haussa to attend to the Hun's injury and ordering others to round up and disarm the prisoners Wilmshurst hurried his men to the storming of the kopje.

On all sides the Waffs were climbing the slopes, yelling and cheering vociferously, but not an answering shout came from the rocky summit. It required enormous restraint on the part of the foe to withhold their fire, while already the Haussas had passed the zone where a volley at comparatively short range would have played havoc with them.

The silence on the part of the enemy seemed incomprehensible unless, not having sufficient numbers to hold the edges of the flat-topped hill they had concentrated at one spot, where with machine-guns they could rake the skyline as the Waffs breasted the top.

Over the position the exultant troops poured, the one fly in the ointment being the fact that their rush had met with no

resistance. In extended order they re-formed and dashed across the plateau—a rapidly contracting line of khaki tipped with steel.

Almost in the centre of the top of the kopje was an irregular mound of piled rocks and earth. Towards this the Waffs charged, their officers momentarily expecting the rattle of musketry and the tic-tac of machine-guns.

Without resistance the Waffs bore on, overran the supposed earthworks and found—nothing.

There were not even traces of Hun occupation. The enemy had got clear away with the exception of the small post rushed by Wilmshurst's platoon. By an evident error of judgment on the part of MacGregor—a non-existent position had been the object of the column's attention, and although the operations were not entirely futile officers and men realised that they had experienced a great disappointment.

Descending the kopje the Waffs fell in, having secured their prisoners under a strong escort. The order to march was about to be given when the distant rattle of musketry was distinctly heard.

The colonel looked at the senior major enquiringly.

"A raiding crush, sir," replied the latter to the unspoken question. "While we've been on a wild goose chase Fritz is raiding our camp."

CHAPTER VI

THE WARNING SHOT

Nobly the sorely-tried Waffs rose to the occasion. Notwithstanding their arduous advance and its meagre results they eagerly hastened to meet the new danger, knowing that with the destruction of their baggage and transport and their lines of communication cut they would be in a serious position in the almost waterless scrub.

They required little urging, the officers' words of encouragement being quite perfunctory although well-intentioned. In open order with flankers thrown out the Waffs hurried through the bush, the sound of continuous rifle-fire growing louder and louder.

"Button's holding out all right," declared the company-major to Wilmshurst, referring to the lieutenant left in charge of the camp. "He has MacGregor and young Vipont to back him up and twenty-five Haussas. Hullo, what's that?"

"German machine-guns, sir," replied Wilmshurst promptly.

"Yes, worse luck," resumed the major. "We've been running after the shadow and the substance butts in during our absence."

An orderly came dashing up with a written message. The major's face fell as he read it.

"We're out of it again, Wilmshurst," he remarked, after the runner had been sent back with a confirmatory report.

"How's that, sir?" asked the subaltern.

"Orders from the colonel for 'A' Company to hold the position shown on the attached map, and to cut off the retreat of the enemy. Here we are: see this kloof? Three platoons are to lie in ambush at that spot, another—yours, Mr. Wilmshurst—will take up a position two miles to the north-west, in case any stragglers attempt to break through the smaller defile shown on the map. It looks nothing more than a native path. We'll find that out later on."

At the word of command "A" Company halted until the rest of the battalion was almost out of sight. Then the detachment, moving to the right in column of fours, marched at a rapid pace along a comparatively clear path through the scrub.

When the three platoons had taken up their position at the indicated spot Wilmshurst's platoon had still a distance of two miles to cover—and that two miles was the roughest part of the whole day's march. It was a disused track possibly dating back to the old days when the Arab slave-raiders traversed the greater part of Central Africa in search of "black ivory," and was now greatly overgrown by cacti and other fibrous plants. Here and there palm trees had fallen completely across the path, while in no part was it more than a yard in breadth, being hedged in on both sides by dense tropical vegetation. And yet the track was distinctly marked upon the German-compiled maps with which the British troops were working.

It was hardly a route that any European under ordinary circumstances would tackle under the glaring heat of the afternoon's sun. Mosquitoes—harbingers of malaria—and fire-flies buzzed in swarms, snakes and lizards, their hitherto undisturbed solitude rudely shaken by the stealthy patter of three score pairs of bare feet, wriggled across the swampy ground, while overhead thousands of frightened birds flew in large circles, chattering the while in a way that would alarm every Boche within a radius of three miles.

A mile and a half of this sort of marching—the Haussas were in single file—and the platoon emerged into a wider track running obliquely across the path they had taken. Halting his men Wilmshurst, assisted by Sergeant Bela Moshi, examined the ground. There were evidences that a number of European and native troops had passed, going in the opposite direction to the Waffs' bivouac, while what was somewhat remarkable there were more recent tracks of a horse's hoofs.

"Him am gov'ment horse, sah," declared the sergeant. "Him lib for go plenty fast no time," meaning that the animal was a British Army mount (this from the peculiar shape of the horse-shoe prints) and had passed by quite recently.

"Probably Sutton dispatched a mounted orderly to summon help," thought Wilmshurst. "In that case the fellow's taken the wrong track. He'll be back shortly. Hope it will be before Fritz ambles along here—if it's our luck that the Huns do retire this way."

Two hundred yards further on the scrub became quite scanty in a wide belt that terminated in a low range of hills. The

slopes of the rising ground were fairly steep except at a gap in the centre, where a deep ravine had been utilized by the makers of the road. It was an ideal spot for an ambuscade. Sheltering behind the cacti that abundantly covered the hill the Haussas could extend on a fairly broad front, and concentrate a heavy fire upon any enemy retiring along the path. The maxim on its tripod mounting was set up to enable it to sweep the expected column with an oblique fire, its panther-skin encased water-jacket being camouflaged by foliage carefully placed so as not to obstruct the sights.

Hardly were these preparations completed when, with a terrific roar and a tremendous cloud of dust, an explosive missile burst within two hundred yards of the platoon's position.

"Dash it all!" ejaculated Wilmshurst. "That's a thundering big shell. Keep down, men."

The Haussas in natural and childlike curiosity were craning their necks to see the unexpected sight. Just then a loud buzzing sound came from immediately overhead. At the risk of being blinded by the terrific glare the subaltern glanced aloft to see a large seaplane that, having completed a long volplane, had restarted its engine. By the conspicuous marks on the wings and fuselage Wilmshurst made the disconcerting discovery that the aircraft was a British machine, and that it was diligently engaged in attempting to bomb the Waffs out of existence under the mistaken idea that they were an enemy patrol.

"That's done it!" muttered Wilmshurst. "The silly joker has

put the kybosh on our chances of surprising the Boches. Lucky if we escape being hit with some of the infernal eggs!"

With difficulty restraining the Haussas from opening fire, for they would not be convinced that the "great buzz-bird" could possibly make a mistake, and that it must be a Boche machine, Dudley awaited developments, watching with decided apprehension the seaplane circling to take up a favourable position for another bomb-dropping effort.

The second missile burst in a donga a hundred yards to the rear of the Haussas' line, while a few seconds later a third exploded at half that distance again on the Waffs' flank.

Wilmshurst was now sarcastically interested.

"If you can't do better than that, old son," he chuckled, "you'd better hook it. My word, if ever I meet you on terra firma, I won't forget to chip you."

The ineffectual strafing continued for nearly a quarter of an hour. At the end of that time the airmen, either discovering their mistake or else having been called up by wireless to attack more numerous forces, desisted from their present operations. Banking steeply the seaplane bore away rapidly in a south-easterly direction, and was soon a mere speck in the azure sky.

Followed a long period of inaction on the part of the Haussas. Scarce daring to move lest a keen-eyed Askari should detect their presence, the Waffs hugged the sun-baked earth until the lengthening shadows warned them of the approach of night.

The distant firing had passed from rapid volleys through desultory exchange of shots to a complete cessation. The rest of "A" Company were not engaged, so it appeared to the still hopeful Haussas that their foes had effected a retreat in a different direction from that expected. With the fall of night a large hostile detachment might easily slip through the scantily-held lines, and that accounted for the uneasy glances that the Waffs gave at the declining orb of day.

"Hist, sah!" exclaimed Bela Moshi. "Dey come."

With every sense keenly on the alert Wilmshurst strove to detect the approach of the foe. Already the men had slipped clips of cartridges into the magazines of their rifles, and, the exact range being known, had set sights to eight hundred yards, at which distance the retiring Huns would be on slightly-sloping ground practically destitute of cover.

A cloud of dust rising sullenly in the still air marked the approach of the column. The Huns were moving rapidly, although there were no sounds to indicate that they were fighting a rear-guard action, while there were no signs of any advance guard.

"We've got them cold," exclaimed Wilmshurst, gleefully, then, "No. 1 Section, volley firing, ready."

Suddenly a shot rang out away on the left front of the concealed Haussas.

"Who the deuce fired that?" thought the subaltern angrily, vowing to make it hot for the luckless black who could not keep control over his itching trigger finger.

The mischief was done. At the warning shot the retiring enemy stopped short almost in the jaws of the trap that awaited them; then at a hot pace they disappeared into the bush to be swallowed up in the rapidly deepening night.

"Find out who fired that shot, sergeant," ordered Wilmshurst.

Bela Moshi's efforts were unavailing. Even when the platoon was paraded and every man's rifle examined the culprit was not discovered.

"Jolly rummy," mused the subaltern. "It's a dead cert that none of my men fired. Some one did. Why and for what reason?"

Fired with anger at the futile ending to their tedious efforts the Haussas sent a deputation to the young officer offering to search the bush in the direction from which the shot came, for the men of the extreme left flank were emphatic in their belief that they heard the sounds of booted feet after the report.

"Off you go, then," replied Wilmshurst. "Hurry back if you hear the 'Fall in.'"

The two men selected—Tari Barl and No Go—lost no time in starting upon their hazardous quest. Armed only with their bayonets the Haussas vanished into the darkness.

Another period of tension ensued. The tropical heat of the day gave place to intense cold as the parched earth rapidly radiated its heat. Presently the stars began to glimmer in the firmament, their brightness increasing to their full splendour of

an African night.

Still no message came for the platoon to fall back upon the rest of "A" Company. Vaguely Wilmshurst began to wonder whether the outlying Waffs had been overlooked. Sixty hours of almost continuous and strenuous work were beginning to tell. Most of the Haussas, utterly worn out, were sleeping in easy yet undignified postures upon the ground, the only men keeping awake being Bela Moshi and the other section commander and sentries posted before Wilmshurst gave the word to stand easy.

Even the subaltern found his head drooping. Half a dozen times he pulled himself together, only to realise that the overpowering desire for sleep had him firmly in its grip.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by the cautious challenge of one of the sentries. Tari Barl and his companion were returning.

"Well?" exclaimed Wilmshurst interrogatively, as the stalwart blacks stood stiffly to attention.

"Man him gone," declared Tari Barl, with the important air of a person making a momentous statement.

"Yes, I know that, Tarry Barrel," replied the subaltern impatiently. "Is that all?"

"Me find dis in bush, sah," continued the imperturbable Haussa, holding up a small, glittering object for his officer's inspection.

It was a recently-fired rimmed cartridge-case. Holding his electric torch to the base of the case he gave vent to an exclamation of perplexed surprise.

For on it were cut the British Government broad arrow and the Roman numeral V., which showed that the cartridge was similar to those issued to the Waffs on leaving camp at Kilwa.

"Treachery!" muttered Wilmshurst. "I wonder——"

CHAPTER VII

A TRUE MAN OR A TRAITOR?

It was in the early hours of the morning when "A" Company marched into bivouac. The men dismissed, Wilmshurst wrote out his report, handed it in and promptly fell sound asleep.

The colonel, wisely deciding that little could be done with men worn out with sleeplessness and fatigue, issued orders that the pursuit would be abandoned until the Haussas had recovered their usual form. Meanwhile other columns were on the track of the raiders, who, but for the vigilance and dogged determination of Lieutenant Sutton, would have "wiped out" the Waffs' bivouac during the latter's wild-goose chase.

For five hours the young officer, assisted by Second-lieutenant Vipont and a handful of Haussas, held the Huns at bay. With rifle, bayonet and bomb the plucky sons of the Empire manned the frail defences, until the enemy, unable to achieve their objective, retired before the returning battalion could bring them to action.

"Hullo, Wilmshurst!" exclaimed Laxdale, as the three subalterns of "A" company met just before a belated breakfast. "What happened to you?"

"A wash-out," replied Dudley. "Held on till five this morning, and never a chance of a shot; or rather, when it came we were dished."

"Heard the news?" asked Danvers. "No? We had it this morning. The Huns have rushed a Portuguese position on the Rovuma. The Portuguese skedaddled, leaving the whole battery of quick-firers intact. I suppose it'll mean our chasing Fritz southward right through Portuguese East. With luck we'll corner them on the Zambesi."

"Guess you're wrong, Danvers," interrupted Laxdale. "I know how the business is going to end; street fighting in Cape Town. Fritz won't stand, so it's an everlasting chase until he's got the sea at his back."

"Any one seen MacGregor this morning?" enquired Wilmshurst.

"MacGregor? Didn't you find him?" asked Vipont, who had joined the group of tired-eyed subalterns. "After the column left camp—about an hour and a half, I should say—he asked Sutton to let him try and overtake the battalion. Said he didn't want to swing the lead with a mere scratch on his shin-bone. So he mounted and rode off. That's the last I saw of him."

"How long before the Huns attacked?" asked Danvers.

"Three hours," replied Vipont. "You don't suggest that a skilled scout blundered right on top of them?"

"Not at all," his questioner hastened to assert. "For one thing after he followed us he would be on a diverging route to that taken by Fritz & Co. What do you say, Wilmshurst?"

Dudley shook his head. He had no particular cause either to like or dislike the man, but he hesitated to give definite

utterance to his suspicions. It was decidedly un-British to condemn a man before being sure of actual facts and to sow the seeds of distrust against an individual who was not present to defend himself. But somehow the chain of events—the horse's footprints on the kloof road, the warning shot when the hitherto unsuspecting Huns were approaching the ambush, the mark V. cartridge case—all pointed to treachery on the part of some one, while MacGregor's disappearance coincided with the other points that had occurred to the subaltern.

"He may be bushed," he replied. "It's just likely that he'll turn up again soon. Has his absence been reported? I'll mention it, if you like. I have to see the adjutant in a few minutes."

Wilmshurst found the adjutant in his "office," which consisted of three walls of piled ammunition boxes, with a double covering of canvas. The furniture was composed of a desk (an upturned packing-case) and a couple of chairs (smaller dittos) the former being littered with official forms and papers, for even in the wilds of Africa the British Army cannot dispense with red-tape formalities.

"Mornin', Mr. Wilmshurst," was the adjutant's greeting as he returned the subaltern's salute. "Want to see you with reference to that report of yours, don't you know. Take a pew. You'll find that case pretty comfortable, and come in out of the sun. Look here: from your report I understand that a warning shot was fired, but not by any of ours. Is that so?"

Wilmshurst paused. The adjutant was quick to notice his hesitation.

"Come, come!" he continued sharply. "Do you suspect any one? If so, out with it. We can't stand on sentiment in matters of this description, don't you know."

"Are you aware, sir, that MacGregor left camp shortly after we left camp and has not returned?"

"Hasn't he, by Jove!" exclaimed the adjutant. "Well, what about it? Has that anything to do with the case in point?"

"I hope not, sir," answered the subaltern, "but—but——"

"Proceed," urged his questioner calmly.

Wilmshurst, seeing no other course, boldly took his plunge, stating his views upon the connection between the scout's disappearance and the timely warning received by the retiring enemy, producing as evidence the rimmed cartridge case, which by reason of its shape and calibre could not be fired from a Mauser rifle.

"Dash it all!" exclaimed the adjutant explosively. "What sort of reptile have we been harbouring? I'm afraid that what steps we take concerning him will be locking the stable door after the horse has gone."

"We are working simply in conjecture, sir," observed the subaltern. "He may be all right, after all."

"Conjecture, confound it!" shouted the other. "What d'you call this?" holding up the cartridge case. "If it isn't circumstantial evidence, what is?"

At that moment an orderly put in an appearance. "Macgreg him horse am come back, sah," he reported, saluting.

The adjutant, picking up a sheaf of papers and putting on his sun-helmet, hurried to the lines where the horses were picketed, Wilmshurst following and the orderly bringing up the rear.

Already news of MacGregor's disappearance had spread, although there was no thought of treachery in the minds of the other officers. They had come to the conclusion that the Rhodesian in an access of zeal had blundered right into the enemy column.

The appearance of the horse bore out this surmise. The animal was lathered with foam, its eyes bloodshot and its limbs trembling. Across the hind quarters was the sear of a bullet that had cut away the hair and left a slight wound in the hide. One stirrup was missing, cut through by means of a sharp implement, while the saddle and reins were dappled with blood-stains.

"Bless my soul, Manners!" exclaimed the colonel turning to the adjutant. "What does this mean?"

"Dunno, sir, I'm sure," answered the dum-founded officer.

"We can't let the affair drop," decided the C.O. "It's not fair on MacGregor to sit still. Tell off a section and follow the horse's tracks. Perhaps the man has been wounded—it looks very much like it—and may be lying out in the bush."

Promptly Bela Moshi and about a dozen men were

dispatched to follow up the spoor. Good trackers all, they ought to experience but little difficulty, notwithstanding the fact that hundreds of men had been trampling the ground, for the Haussas vie with the Australian aborigines and the Red Indian in the act of tracing a man or an animal for miles with uncanny skill and persistence.

Hardly had the Haussas departed on their errand when a couple of British naval officers literally staggered into the bivouac. At first they were too utterly done up to speak. They were parched with thirst, their drill uniforms torn in their long trek through the scrub, and their boots were cut almost to pieces. One of them was limping badly as the result of a sprained ankle.

Under the care of Doctor Barclay the stragglers soon recovered sufficiently to give a coherent account of their misadventures. They were the observer and pilot of one of the seaplanes attached to the Rovuma column, their base being close to a large sheet of water formed by the inundation of the river. Out reconnoitring they had discovered a party of Huns and had bombed them very effectually. That was their version, although Wilmshurst had good reason to believe that they were quite under a misapprehension on that score. On the return flight the engine developed ignition troubles, and there was no help for it but to plane down. The airmen were lucky in being able to find a fairly open stretch of ground, but the unexpected happened. The floats of the seaplane skidded over the hard ground and caught against some obstruction, with the result that the machine was badly damaged, the pilot and observer being thrown violently.

Forty miles from their base the airmen realised that it was almost out of the question to make their way on foot through the scrub, especially as there were several small rivers to be negotiated. So they decided to find the bivouac of the Waffs which they had spotted on their outward flight. According to their estimate the distance was about eight miles, but in reality it was almost twice that distance.

Owing to the intense heat they were compelled to discard their overalls. Their foot gear was totally inadequate against the thorns and stony ground. Without water and with only a bar of chocolate between them they experienced terrible hardships before they sighted their temporary refuge.

Their chief anxiety was now the question whether the seaplane could be recovered. On this score their minds were set at rest, when the colonel promised to send out a fatigue party to dismantle the machine and transport it to the banks of the Runkoma, a small stream sufficiently wide to allow the seaplane to taxi provided the floats were still intact.

"You might take that job on, Mr. Wilmshurst," remarked his company commander. "Your platoon will be just about sufficient to provide the necessary labour, and also a covering party, although I don't contemplate any trouble from the Huns. We've just heard that Fritz has had a nasty smack at Motungba, which more than counterbalances his recent success against the Portuguese on the Rovuma."

The action to which the major referred was a brilliant little affair on the part of the main column operating in the Rovuma valley. The Huns were found to be in a strong natural position,

the defence of which was further increased by well-constructed trenches and entanglements.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of a frontal attack, a Punjabi regiment stormed the defences, the Indians making terrific havoc with bombs. The Askaris broke and fled, the Germans alone putting up a fight until they were either killed or captured. The native levies in their flight were overtaken and cut up by a squadron of colonial horse, and with slight loss the Imperial forces scored a dashing little victory, capturing four field guns and one naval gun removed from the cruiser *Konigsberg*, beside a vast quantity of arms and ammunition.

The result of this engagement was a junction with the gallant Belgian forces, the Huns being split up into two groups, of which the principal force was on the Portuguese border, while the other, subdivided into mobile detachments, was doubling back towards the Rufigi river.

"These fellows will give trouble," declared the major. "They won't stand. They are in a mortal funk of enveloping movements; but by the time we've rounded 'em up we'll be jolly sick of the show, you mark my words."

The return of Bela Moshi and his section diverted Wilmshurst's attention into another channel. The Haussa sergeant had succeeded in following the spoor of MacGregor's horse for three and a half miles along the path taken by the Waffs of their practically barren operations against the kopje when the Huns had been reported. Here the trail ended in a medley of hoof-prints, while hard by a rock were traces of the splaying of half a dozen bullets. In the sun-baked grass in front

of the rock were found ten used cartridge cases and a stirrup-iron, but a prolonged search faded to reveal any traces of the missing Rhodesian's departure from the spot where he had apparently been brought to bay. There were hundreds of footprints all around; those of Askaris and Germans, for none of the imprints of booted feet bore any resemblance to those of Robert MacGregor.

At the first opportunity the adjutant called Wilmshurst aside.

"You didn't mention your suspicions to any one else?" he enquired.

"No, sir," replied Dudley.

"It's just as well for the present," continued Captain Manners. "For MacGregor's sake I hope that you have done him an injustice, but I am quite convinced that you acted judiciously in communicating your suspicions to me. However, there's still one point that wants clearing up. The patrol did not find MacGregor's body. Nor was there any spoor to show which way he went if he did succeed in breaking through the enemy. The third surmise is that he might have been taken prisoner. If so, is it likely that the Huns provided him with a horse? I think not. Knowing Fritz as we do, the sort of thing that they would do would be to lash his wrists, and drag him at the end of a line—but Bela Moshi was emphatic that none of the boot-prints corresponded to those of the missing man. Until the mystery is cleared up, we are at a loss to understand whether MacGregor is a true man or a traitor."

CHAPTER VIII

ULRICH VON GOBENDORFF

Hauptmann Max von Argerlich, senior surviving officer of the 99th Regiment of Askaris, was in a furious temper with himself and every one with whom he came in contact. It might have been the unusual exertion of a forced march in the heat of the sun, or an insufficiency of food that had upset him. The hard-worked Askaris had good cause to dread his passionate outbursts, for on these occasions lashes were ordered at the faintest pretext, for efficiency, according to the hauptmann's ideas, could only be maintained by an active display of physical force.

Von Argerlich's depleted and harassed force lay entrenched at M'ganga, after having withdrawn from another fortified position half an hour too late according to the hauptmann's idea. All but surrounded, the Askaris just managed to escape being captured to a man, and now, temporarily safe from pursuit, the regiment had arrived at a prepared position to await another column known to be retiring in a north-westerly direction.

The hauptmann was a middle-aged officer, a Prussian who through some indiscretion that had given offence to his Imperial master had been practically banished by being sent to German East Africa. That was two years before the war. Upon the outbreak of hostilities he hoped by melodramatic means to find himself restored to favour, but to his chagrin he saw that younger officers gained promotion in the German Colonial

Forces while he remained at this present rank of hauptmann.

With a bottle of spirits by his side von Argerlich sprawled upon a camp bed, while in the absence of mosquito curtain two lean Askaris, terrified by the Hun's drunken outburst, were diligently fanning him with broad leaves of a palm, knowing that if their efforts relaxed or developed into greater zeal than the hauptmann desired, the schambok awaited them.

Von Argerlich had good cause to remember the scrap before the retreat. A bullet fired from behind had nicked his ear, and he knew that it was one of his Askaris who had fired. As a warning he had ordered half a dozen of the luckless natives to be executed, but even then he was far from certain that the culprit was included in the number. There were strong signs of mutinous insubordination in the ranks of the 99th Askari Regiment, and only the fact that the expected column was on its way to join the forces under von Argerlich's command kept the black troops in any semblance of order.

The hauptmann was both sorry and glad on that account; sorry because he would automatically drop into a subordinate position when other German officers superior in rank came in with the column; glad, since there would be sufficient Europeans to overawe the iron-disciplined yet mutinous native troops.

The appearance of the German sergeant-major interrupted the hauptmann's reveries. Clicking his heels and stiffly saluting the veteran awaited his officer's permission to speak.

"Well, dolt?" enquired von Argerlich thickly.

"A scout has just reported that the Gwelba column has been sighted, Herr Hauptmann," announced the warrant officer. "The advance guard ought to be here within half an hour."

"It is well," replied the hauptmann, rising unsteadily. "Tell Lieutenant Muller to get the men under arms. Where's my sword? Hans, you black schweinhund, bring me my boots, and take care that there are no centipedes in them, or——"

Still grumbling the hauptmann buckled on his sword, donned his sun-helmet and boots and went out into the open space between the trench and the lines of low-built huts where the remnants of the 99th regiment—250 men out of a full strength of 1,200—were falling in.

Worn and weary the advance guard of the column limped into the camp, followed at regular intervals by the main body. With the latter was Oberst von Lindenfelt, the senior officer of the column, and another individual dressed in nondescript garments whose face seemed familiar to von Argerlich.

"Greetings, Max!" exclaimed von Lindenfelt. "Let us hope you have plenty of food. We are almost starving."

"Not much in that line, Herr Oberst," replied von Argerlich. "How have you fared?"

"Donnerwetter!" said the oberst vehemently. "Things have gone badly. It is indeed fortunate that we managed to find our way in. Had it not been for von Gobendorff here—you have met von Gobendorff before, I understand?"

"Der teufel!" ejaculated the hauptmann, grasping the hand of

the motley-garbed man, "of course I have. Ulrich, ten thousand pardons, but in two years a man is apt to alter, especially in these strenuous times. Has anything happened that you have been compelled to drop your Scottish name? Let me think. Ach! I have it. MacGregor, was it not?"

Ulrich von Gobendorff shook his head. "Nothing compelled me, Max," he replied. "The time was ripe—therefore Robert MacGregor is no more. The name and character served their purpose," he continued, assuming a boastful tone. "It was I who warned von Lindenfelt's column when it stood a good chance of being cut off at Gwelba kopje. Again it is to my credit that a detachment of our forces was not ambushed at Zwarte kloof. I covered my tracks very effectively, did I not, Herr Oberst? Himmel. I have news for you, Max. The brother of your personal enemy, Rupert Wilmshurst, is with the English forces operating against us. Several times I have spoken to him."

"Has he any suspicion?" asked the hauptmann anxiously.

"None at all," replied von Gobendorff. "It was easy to tell him a plausible tale. And how fares the interfering Englishman, Rupert Wilmshurst?"

"We still have him in close confinement up in the Karewenda Geberge," replied the hauptmann carelessly.

"A personal matter?" enquired Oberst von Lindenfelt.

"The accursed Englishman struck me a blow because I thought fit to chastise a thieving native woman," replied von Argerlich. "That was when the fellow was still prowling round

to find the ammunition which we buried in readiness for the present time. Our good friend Ulrich trapped him."

"Why didn't you shoot the Englishman as soon as I had departed for South-West Africa?" enquired Ulrich von Gobendorff. "It would have been a simple solution to the difficulty, for dead men tell no tales."

"I would have done so," replied the hauptmann, "but for this reason. There were hundreds of natives who saw him taken away under arrest. If things go wrong with us they will most certainly inform the English. Also I do not wish to be a subject for reprisals, as I hear our foes are adopting that attitude. If we are to be on the losing side it pays us to walk circumspectly. By the bye, have you heard anything lately of your brother, Ernst?"

"Not for many months," replied Ulrich von Gobendorff. "The last time I received indirect tidings that he was doing good work in England. It will take a very smart man to catch Ernst. He is one of the most wily Secret Service Agents in the employ of the German Imperial Government."

Oberst von Lindenfelt having dismissed the troops the three Germans adjourned to the hauptmann's quarters, where over the remains of the bottle of spirits conversation was resumed.

"Tell me how you gave the Englishman the slip, Ulrich," asked von Argerlich.

"It was quite a simple matter," replied the spy. "I informed the camp commander—he was a simple sort of leutnant—that I was going to overtake the column, the column, by the bye,

having been sent by me on a fool's errand to capture an imaginary laager on Gwelba kopje. According to previous arrangements I fell in with Hauptmann Schmidt's company, and he obligingly set a squad of his Askaris to work to stage the last stand of Scout MacGregor. We trampled the grass, left a few cartridge cases lying about and sent my borrowed horse away with a bullet-wound in his flank to hurry him up, and to give additional colour to the effect. I should not be surprised to see the name of Robert MacGregor posthumously honoured with the British Military Medal or something of that sort."

The three Huns laughed uproariously. Under the temporarily exhilarating effect of the rank spirit they were beginning to forget their physical exhaustion.

"To be on the safe side," continued von Gobendorff, "it will be necessary for me to get as far away from the Nth-West African Regiment as I can. I presume that you have no objection to my leaving you, Herr Oberst?"

Von Lindenfelt grunted assent.

"Can you get clear of the colony?" he asked. "Every frontier is guarded, while since the *Jaguar* succeeded in running her cargo of quick-firers ashore even the coast is rigidly patrolled by those accursed English cruisers."

"Give me a dozen native carriers, rifles and ammunition, and I'll wager that before another fortnight I'll be in Rhodesia," declared von Gobendorff. "Once there the rest will be easy; train to Cape Town, mail-boat to Plymouth, our splendid unterseebooten permitting; then, having applied to a certain

compatriot in London for a forged passport, I'll cross to Flushing and be in German territory three months from now."

"If you do, please don't forget to inform the authorities at Berlin that I am still doing good work for the Fatherland," remarked the hauptmann earnestly. "The War Office seems to forget us out here."

"Quite so," agreed von Lindenfelt. "We do not get even Iron Crosses, although we are still holding out after two years of incessant guerrilla warfare. Only the other day——"

A junior officer stood in the doorway, his flaccid features working with excitement.

"Pardon, Herr Oberst," he exclaimed, as he saluted. "An English aeroplane——"

"Donnerwetter!" interrupted the German excitedly. "Is that so? Von Argerlich, I trust that there is a positively bomb-proof shelter available? How far away is the accursed machine, Herr Schmidt? Is it flying in the direction of M'ganga?"

"No, sir," replied the leutnant gravely. He wanted to smile, but a display of mirth at the expense of a superior officer was not advisable. "It has fallen at about twelve kilometres from here. Our scouts reported that the two occupants were seen tramping through the bush in the direction of the English bivouac four miles south of Gwelba."

"Why did not the Askaris shoot them?" demanded Oberst von Lindenfelt.

"There were but three of our scouts and the Englishmen were armed," explained the German. "I would venture to suggest, Herr Oberst, that the men did well to return immediately with their report rather than risk being disabled in an attempt to engage the airmen."

Von Lindenfelt pondered a few moments, then he turned abruptly to Ulrich von Gobendorff.

"I believe you understand aeroplanes, Ulrich," he said. "Did you not fly at the great Johannesthal meeting a few years ago? I thought you told me so. Ah! yes. You will accompany Hauptmann von Argerlich and a half company of Askaris. If the machine is easily repairable, fly it back here, otherwise destroy it. Until this duty is performed I withhold my permission for you to leave the column. Start as soon as possible. A horse will be provided you."

It was useless to demur. The oberst's word was law. Inwardly raging von Gobendorff rose to his feet, stiffly saluted and followed the hauptmann out of the hut in execution of von Lindenfelt's order.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT FOR THE SEAPLANE

At dawn Wilmshurst left the camp, accompanied by the full platoon, to attempt the salving of the crippled seaplane. It was a comparatively easy matter to follow the tracks of the two airmen, for the down-trodden grass and the frequent sights of wisps of clothing adhering to the briars and thorns were evidences of a spoor that even an indifferent scout could determine.

"Those two johnnies must have had a rough time of it," thought the subaltern. "I can well imagine their difficulties. It's a wonder they got to the camp at all, for there are distinct spoors of lions. What's that, Bela Moshi?"

"Big rhino him come by," reported the sergeant, pointing to heavy depression on the ground. What he meant was that a rhinoceros had cut across the bush path not so very long ago, as the freshly trampled grass showed.

"All right," replied Wilmshurst. "Warn the men to be on the alert. We don't want casualties."

Bela Moshi hurried to the head of the column, for the Haussas were in single file, owing to the narrowness of the bush-path.

At that moment the platoon was crossing a dried water-course, the ground shelving steeply on both sides. The

subaltern had an almost uninterrupted view of the heads and shoulders of the men preceding him as the foremost began the stiff ascent beyond the nullah.

Suddenly the Haussas broke right and left, uttering warning shouts. Charging down the narrow track was a huge animal of the buffalo tribe, commonly known in Central Africa as a "bush-cow."

The ground trembled under the thud of the brute's ponderous weight as it rushed at terrific speed to attack the khaki-clad blacks.

One man alone stood his ground. Dropping on one knee he fired straight at the centre of the tufts of hair that concealed the animal's eyes, the range being less than thirty yards.

Dudley heard the almost simultaneous crash of the rifle and the thud of the bullet against the bush-cow's frontal-bone, but apparently unharmed the animal continued its headlong rush.

Too late the plucky Haussa attempted to avoid the impetus by springing aside. Even as he leapt to his feet the man was caught by the lowered head of the ferocious brute and tossed ten feet in the air.

Across the bed of the dried-up stream the bush-cow charged, until Wilmshurst hurriedly came to the conclusion that it was quite time for him to dodge behind a tree. As he made for shelter he saw the animal's fore-legs collapse and its ponderous carcass plough the ground.

Making his way through the press of excited Haussas

Wilmshurst saw that the bush-cow was stone dead. The bullet had penetrated the brain, entering by a neatly-drilled puncture and emerging by a hole as large as a man's fist. Yet, although hit in a vital spot, the animal had covered a distance of nearly fifty yards before collapsing.

"One no go," declared Bela Moshi. "Anoder him lib for come plenty quick."

"Think so?" remarked the subaltern. "Then don't stand bunched up together—extend. Three of you lift Nara Gilul into the shade."

Anxiously Wilmshurst examined the brave but unfortunate black. Nara Gilul was fully conscious in spite of having fallen on his head, but two of his ribs were fractured and his shins were badly cut although protected by his puttees.

"Nara Gilul him stop till we come back," suggested the corporal of his section in answer to Dudley's question as to what was to be done. "Him 'ab rifle an' ammunition. Him lib to take care ob himsel'. Berry much him fault."

"That won't do, corporal," said Wilmshurst. "We must send him back. Take five men with you. It will be only two hours' trek."

Accordingly the Haussas set to work to make a stretcher, performing the task with wonderful celerity. They were on the point of lifting the helpless man when the shout was raised.

"Bush-cow, him come!"

"Take cover, all of you!" shouted the subaltern, loath to hamper his task by additional casualties.

The Haussas obeyed with one exception—Bela Moshi.

The sergeant, slipping a clip into the magazine, stood right in the centre of the path along which the second bush-cow was tearing, eager to avenge its mate.

Wilmshurst made no further attempt to order Bela Moshi to take refuge. He realised that to do so would flurry the imperturbable sergeant, but he was entirely at a loss to understand why the Haussa was apparently courting disaster in precisely the same way as the luckless Nara Gilul had done.

A rifle bolt clicked in the bush on the sergeant's flank.

"Unload!" he hissed, knowing that the risk he ran from an excited man with a loaded rifle was greater than that confronting him.

At a terrific pace the bush-cow bore down. Twenty yards from the motionless man the brute lowered its head. In that position its vision was obscured by the thick tufts of long hair. Having taken its final "sighting position" the animal relied upon its momentum to achieve the destruction of its human enemy.

The moment the bush-cow lowered its head Bela Moshi, with every sense on the alert, leapt sideways behind a tree. Then, as the infuriated quadruped thundered past, the Haussa brought his rifle to the shoulder and fired.

Thirty yards further the bush-cow dropped and died with a bullet through its heart, while the victor, grinning as only a black can grin, strode magnificently up to his victim and planted one foot upon the quivering carcass.

The injured man having been sent back and the carcasses of the two animals dragged aside—they would provide excellent meat if the task of sun drying the flesh was not unduly delayed—the march was resumed, until on gaining the summit of a low hill the wings of the broken-down seaplane were visible as they rose obliquely above the scanty scrub at a distance of nearly two miles.

Halting his men, Wilmshurst made a careful survey of the ground by means of his binoculars. A number of large birds—*aasvogels*, or African vultures—were circling over the derelict. It was therefore safe to conclude that no human being, unless helpless to lift a hand, was in the vicinity.

In the midst of his investigations Tari Barl approached with a self-satisfied smile on his ebony features.

"Askari him foots, sah!" he reported, holding up three fingers of his right hand to indicate that he had discovered the spoor of three of the German native soldiery.

"H'm!" muttered Dudley. "That's rotten news. New spoor, Tarry Barrel?"

The Haussa nodded vehemently, and led his officer to the footprints.

Examination showed that three natives had been following

the spoor of the two naval airmen. The firm tread of the latter —for at that stage of the journey they were comparatively fresh—was partly obliterated by the typical imprints of a black walking stealthily on his toes, for the impress of the heels hardly occurred. The Askaris had abandoned the trail a short distance from the brow of the hill, for there were marks where they had stood and debated, and the spoor leading in a north-westerly direction showed that they had gone by a different route from the one they had followed. This track did not lead in the direction of the stranded seaplane, so Wilmshurst conjectured that the Askaris had made straight for their main body, possibly with the intention of bringing men to recover the trophy.

Again the subaltern levelled his glasses and swept the skyline. Wending their way down a bare kloof were about two hundred armed blacks and three men in European garb riding in the centre of the column.

"MacGreg him dar, sah!" exclaimed Bela Moshi.

"Nonsense!" replied Wilmshurst, yet in his heart he was not at all sure but that the Haussa was right.

"MacGreg him make palaver with Bosh-bosh," declared the sergeant.

It was a contest between a pair of high-powered field glasses and the eyesight of a native. Vainly Wilmshurst wiped the lenses and looked and looked again without being able to satisfy himself that Bela Moshi's statement was correct.

"Here, you boy!" said the sergeant addressing Tari Barl.

"You come here an' use yer eyes all one time quick. Say who am white man on der black horse."

"Me tink MacGreg him come," replied Tari Barl after a brief survey. "No; me no tink me know."

Wilmshurst waited inactive. Until the approaching hostile column had descended from the high ground and the men were deep in the bush, attempt on the part of the Haussas to advance from the ridge would result in the latter's detection. So, holding the men well under cover Wilmshurst kept the Huns under observation until it was safe to attempt a surprise.

Long before the extended line of troops had marched into the scrub-laden valley, the subaltern was forced to come to the conclusion that MacGregor was not only with the enemy, but obviously one of them. As the distance decreased he could make out the man's features, quite distinctly, and could see him talking volubly with the German officers on either side.

The Askaris were numerically far stronger than Wilmshurst's platoon, but the Haussas had a great advantage—that of being the surprising force. In bush fighting especially this is a decided advantage, since the closeness of the ground prevents the troops attacked knowing the number or disposition of their opponents, while the moral effect of a sudden rush of well-armed and disciplined men upon enemies practically unprepared for the onslaught cannot be under-estimated.

"MacGreg him make for maquisha," declared Bela Moshi grimly, as he carefully blacked the foresight of his rifle.

"Maquisha" in the Haussa language signifies something more than finished. A man might say, "I've finished eating," for example, and yet in a few hours he will be again satisfying his hunger, but "maquisha" signifies finished in the penultimate sense—the final extermination of a certain person or thing.

"No, no, Bela Moshi," said Wilmshurst decidedly. "We want MacGreg taken prisoner. That's important. Pass the word along; tell the men that there's a month's pay to the Haussa who takes MacGreg alive."

It was rather a tall order, and Wilmshurst knew it. MacGregor, now openly a traitor, would not be likely to surrender in view of the fact that a drum-head court-martial and an ignominious death in front of a firing-party would certainly be his fate.

Returning his field glasses and confidently snapping the lid of the case Wilmshurst gave the word to advance in open order. He had decided upon a position about two hundred yards short of the derelict aircraft, guessing that the still unsuspecting enemy would concentrate upon that objective, and thus form a compact and easy target for the Haussas' rifles.

Naturally concluding that the airmen had chosen the most open stretch of ground available for the purpose of making their landing, Wilmshurst found that his judgment was sound. Right in the centre of the valley the scrub was almost entirely absent, the ground being covered with grass little more than ankle deep in height and absolutely devoid of cover over a belt of nearly four hundred yards in width.

Up to a certain point the Huns showed caution, for presently two Askaris, pushing on ahead of the main body, came into view. That they expected no danger was apparent from the fact that they had their rifles slung. At the sight of the derelict seaplane they stood stock-still, for it was the first aircraft at rest that they had seen. Then bounding across the intervening stretch of grass they wandered round and round the machine, jabbering and pointing out to each other various parts of the aeroplane that particularly struck their attention.

The shrill blasts of a whistle diverted their thoughts into another direction. The officer in charge of the Askari column had signalled to the scouts to advance and examine the scrub beyond the place where the seaplane stood.

Like well-trained dogs the two native soldiers obeyed, and with their rifles still slung they hastened towards the position occupied by the alert Haussas, passing between two clumps of cacti behind which were hiding Tari Barl, No Go, Double-headed Penny and two more of No. 1 Section.

The Haussas let them pass. Unsuspicious the Askaris proceeded until their movements were hidden from their friends by the intervening scrub, then with hardly a sound the five lithe and muscular Waffs leapt upon them.

Before the startled men could even utter a gurgle they were lying flat on their backs, unable to move hand or foot, while a hand laid over their mouths and a keen-edged bayonet laid across their throats warned them that silence was the only alternative to sudden death.

Accepting the former choice the prisoners were bound and gagged, and taken a hundred yards or so into the bush, a Haussa mounting guard over them to make sure that the wily Askaris did not slip their bonds.

Wilmshurst's anxiety was now the thought that the main body would not emerge from the bush, since the two scouts were not able to signal that all was well. Several minutes passed, but still the German troops failed to debouch from the scrub.

A stealthy footstep behind him made the subaltern turn his head. To his surprise he saw Bela Moshi rigged out in the uniform and equipment of one of the captives.

"Me give Bosh-bosh de word 'Come on' one time quick, sah," he announced. "Me know how."

Wilmshurst did not think fit to enquire how the resourceful sergeant acquired the information. There are times when an officer does well not to question his subordinate's actions.

"Very good, carry on," he whispered.

Standing in a gap between two clumps of bushes Bela Moshi, grasping his rifle a few inches from the muzzle, held the weapon vertically above his head moving it to and fro five or six times.

The decoy signal was almost immediately answered by the appearance of the main body of the Askaris and with them the three Europeans, who were still mounted.

Wilmshurst let them approach until the foremost Askaris were within a hundred yards of the seaplane. They were now in no semblance of order, surging impetuously forward, their officers towering head and shoulders above the throng.

Sharp and shrill rang out the subaltern's whistle. A volley, crisp and clear, burst from the line of admirably concealed Haussas, then each man "let rip" as fast as he could withdraw, and thrust home the bolt of his rifle and bring the weapon to his shoulder.

It was such a tremendous surprise that for a moment the Askaris, save those who dropped, stood stock still. Then, panic-stricken, they broke and fled, the German officers setting them the example.

As the so-called MacGregor wheeled his horse Bela Moshi, who had withheld his fire, saw his opportunity. At five hundred yards he sent a bullet crashing through the devoted animal's head. Like a stone the horse dropped, throwing its rider to the earth.

By some means the dried grass took fire, the flames crackling and roaring as they spread with great rapidity, fortunately away from the broken-down seaplane. Through the whirling clouds of smoke could be faintly discerned the backs of the fugitives, many of whom dropped as they ran with a Haussa's bullet betwixt their shoulder blades, while remorselessly the devouring element made its way in the direction of the place where the traitor had fallen.

So complete was the demoralization of the foe that

Wilmshurst had now no hesitation in ordering an advance at the double. Although the German levies still greatly outnumbered the Haussas the former had—in Tommy parlance —"the wind up properly," and numerical superiority no longer counted.

With fixed bayonets the platoon swept forward. Over the path of the fire the Haussas rushed, the still glowing embers failing to deter them, their bare feet notwithstanding. Yelling and shouting they pursued their foes, sweeping aside all isolated attempts at resistance, until the remnants of the hostile column were driven more than two miles from the scene of their surprise.

It took considerable efforts on the part of the non-commissioned officer to make the highly-elated Haussas desist from pursuit, but Wilmshurst knew too well the rashness of a prolonged chase through difficult country. Retiring, picking up wounded and prisoners as they went, the Waffs re-formed on arriving at the open belt of ground where the brilliant little victory had commenced.

By this time the scrub was well alight, fanned by the strong south-easterly breeze. The fire was also working against the wind, but the concerted efforts of the Haussas prevented it approaching the derelict aircraft.

In vain a search was made for the traitor who was known to the Haussas as MacGreg. His horse, surrounded by half a dozen badly-charred corpses, was discovered, but of the rider there were no signs. Reluctantly Wilmshurst was forced to come to the conclusion that fortune had favoured the recreant,

and that under cover of the dense smoke the fellow had either crawled away or else had been carried by some of the Askaris.

CHAPTER X

PREPARATIONS

"Well, sergeant; how many casualties?"

Bela Moshi, wearing a broad smile, saluted.

"Brass Pot, him head-bone blown inside out," he replied, as cheerfully as only a Haussa can when reporting losses amongst his comrades. "Nimshi Pali, him no good—maquisha. Dat all dead, but plenty much Haussa hurt—so many."

He indicated by means of his fingers that fifteen were more or less seriously wounded, a fairly heavy toll of the sixty odd men who had paraded that morning. Nevertheless, the sacrifice had not been made in vain, for a numerically stronger force had been completely routed with the loss of eighteen left dead upon the field, and thirty-eight wounded and unwounded prisoners, together with fifty-nine Mauser rifles, which, for want of transport, were smashed after the bolt action of each had been removed.

Having taken proper precautions against a surprise counter-attack, although such a step was unlikely in view of the demoralization of the defeated force, Wilmshurst directed his attention to the object of the expedition—the saving of the seaplane.

West African natives are as a rule good carpenters and blacksmiths, and the Haussas were no exception. Under

Wilmshurst's directions they set to work to dismantle the machine, removing the planes as carefully and expeditiously as a party of crack mechanics from the Royal Air Force factories. One of the floats was badly smashed, but the other was practically intact except for a small jagged hole in the three-ply mahogany.

In a couple of hours the machine was ready for transport across five miles of bush country, although, fortunately, the ground was fairly level.

A pair of mountain gun wheels on a broad base-line had been brought for the purpose, and the chassis, engine included, was rested on the axle. Relays of men steadied and propelled the heavy load, others armed with axes and entrenching spades going on ahead to clear the path. Other parties transported the floats and planes, while advance and rear guards and flankers were thrown out to guard against a possible surprise, while an escort had to be provided for the prisoners.

With frequent halts it was not surprising that the rate of progress was roughly one and a half miles an hour, and it was close on sunset when the rescued seaplane arrived at the banks of a small river, where the Waffs, having struck camp in the vicinity of Gwelba, had only just marched in.

Colonel Quarrier was delighted with Wilmshurst's report and personally complimented him upon the way in which he had accomplished the difficult task with which he had been entrusted, and also the brilliant little action, which was quite unexpected.

"Pity you didn't either plug or capture that worthless scoundrel MacGregor," he remarked, for there was now no doubt about the utter faithlessness of the supposed Rhodesian. "A man like that will cause more trouble than a dozen machine-guns. I suppose, in the course of former conversations with him, you did not detect any trace of a foreign accent?"

"None whatever, sir," replied Dudley.

"Or mannerisms?"

Again the subaltern replied in the negative.

"I can only hope," continued Colonel Quarrier, "that the fellow isn't an Englishman. It is just possible that he is of German nationality, and that long years of residence either in Great Britain or the colonies has enabled him to totally suppress his Hunnish accent and traits, although it is almost an impossible matter to eradicate his sympathies for his kultured Fatherland. 'Once a German, always a German,' you know."

Having been dismissed by his colonel, Dudley was questioned and congratulated by Captain Manners, the adjutant, who also expressed regret that the so-called MacGregor had contrived to escape capture. The members of the "Lone Star Crush" were boisterously warm in their congratulations, chaffing the subaltern as well as they knew; but Wilmshurst, alive to the mannerisms of his brother-officers, took their facetious remarks in good part.

The two officer-airmen added their thanks and good wishes. They were still too weak to walk any distance and had to be carried in roughly-constructed "dhoolies" by the Haussas.

Their relief on learning that the seaplane was safely alongside the river was great, especially when they were promised that the work of repairing the floats would be put in hand forthwith.

"Your C.O. evidently wants to get rid of us," declared the pilot smiling. "A crippled 'bus hampers the mobility of the column. We heard that a runner came in just now before we left Gwelba, with the news that an ammunition column and details are on their way up-country. We've sent down for more petrol, so things look rosy—thanks principally to you."

"That's nothing," expostulated Wilmshurst. "Merely returning good for evil—that's all."

"'Returning good for evil,'" repeated the pilot. "I don't understand you."

"Let me explain," continued Dudley, laughing at the thought of disillusioning the airmen. "A day or two ago my platoon were posted on the M'ganga road. We were just settling down nicely to give Fritz a warm welcome when you two fellows started dropping bombs on us."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the observer. "We thought we were strafing a mob of Huns. No damage, I trust?"

"You would have heard of it before now if there had been," replied Wilmshurst. "The nearest one just dusted some of my men, that's all. We couldn't get you to see that we were a Haussa platoon, and I had a nice old job keeping my men in hand. They wanted to take pot shots at you. By the bye, what made you chuck it—clear out after dropping only a few bombs?"

"Our last, fortunately for you," said the pilot. "I say, what a frost! An' we claimed four direct hits, didn't we?"

"We did," corroborated the other dourly. "We seriously considered the idea of giving you a couple of trays of Lewis gun ammunition, Mr. Wilmshurst. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to distinguish between British and German native troops from any height. By the bye, did you find a mahogany box in the fuselage? Good! it contains undeveloped photograph plates. One we took of your position. I'll send along a print when we get back to our base. It will interest you."

The Waffs were to remain in camp for three days, pending the arrival of the convoy. Even had the latter not been expected the Haussas were temporarily rendered immobile by the presence of the crippled seaplane and her crew, and also by the number of prisoners. The captive Askaris were subjected to a strict examination, with the result that it was discovered that Robert MacGregor was really a German, and a person of some official capacity, since he was on friendly terms with the Hun commandant, while an Askari sergeant gave the traitor's name with great distinctness, Ulrich von Gobendorff, adding that the German used to have charge of a fortified post at Twashi in the Narewenda Hills.

"That's not so very many miles from the Rhodesian border," thought Wilmshurst, as he made a note of the name in his pocket-book. "I wonder if we are ever likely to operate in that district?"

Other information given by the prisoners fixed the position of a German entrenched post held by three native regiments

and a handful of whites, at M'ganga, under the command of von Lindenfelt.

"M'ganga? I thought this was M'ganga," exclaimed the puzzled adjutant, referring to a map. "Ask the prisoner how far he marched and in what direction before he was captured?"

The man having replied, Captain Manners was able to locate the spot. On the German-inspired maps it was shown as a place, whereas, according to the Askari's description M'ganga was a fairly extensive table-land, precipitous on three sides, while on the fourth the ground descended in a series of slight terraces to a broad but shallow river, fordable at a dozen places, within a distance of a couple of miles.

"If only the beggars will stand," exclaimed Colonel Quarrier, "the place will be well worth going for. With our small force a turning movement seems rather a tall order. Of course, if we can get in touch with the Pathan regiments at Kilmoro—and there's a detachment of Rhodesian Light Horse, too, I believe."

"Yes, sir," agreed the senior major. "If we can co-operate—cannot we send a runner, sir? He'll be back before the ammunition and a supply column comes in."

In quick time the repairs to the seaplane were completed, and the craft moored afloat in a wide expanse of the river. Owing to the difficult country, where an aeroplane fitted with landing-wheels would be at a loss to find a suitable spot to alight, a seaplane stood a better chance, owing to the presence of several wide rivers, and here the Sea Service machines of

the Royal Air Force scored over the German aircraft; most of which were already *hors de combat*, and could not be replaced owing to the lack of material and the cutting off of German East Africa from practically all communication without.

On hearing of the proposed attack upon von Lindenfelt the naval airmen, who were rapidly recovering from the effect of their arduous and perilous trek, volunteered to remain and co-operate. For observation purposes and machine-gunning the Huns they would be able to render yeoman service, while, when their offer was promptly accepted, the ingenious officers set to work to manufacture bombs.

These missiles, rough and ready in construction, were none the less formidable, while the moral effect was a great consideration. The "eggs" consisted of small sacks filled with cordite, both loose and in cartridges, while by manipulating the fuses of Mills bombs, so that the period between release and explosion was increased to six seconds, the improvised missiles were made to detonate just before reaching the ground after a fall of six hundred feet.

The tempestuous shouts of the Haussas announced the arrival of the transport column, for food was beginning to run short and the men's rations would have had to have been reduced had not the expected stores been speedily forthcoming. There was petrol, too, enough for a series of flights over a distance of two hundred miles; while to the intense satisfaction of officers and men big Jock Spofforth rejoined the regiment, looking none the worse for his encounter with the lioness, except for the still raw scars on his brawny arms.

"Just in time for a dust-up, I find, old man," was his reply to Wilmshurst's greeting. "You've been lucky already, I hear? Where's that MacGregor chap? Is he still with the battalion?"

Briefly Dudley explained what had happened.

"Skunk," muttered Spofforth. "So we've been taking a dirty Hun under our wing, so to speak. I don't mind admitting now that I didn't think much of the blighter when he pushed off and promptly fainted."

"But I scooted, too," interrupted Laxdale, "and left you to tackle the lioness."

"I also plead guilty," added Danvers.

"But with this difference," rejoined Spofforth: "you were unarmed and he had a rifle. Ah, well; you fellows have stolen a march on me, and I've a lot of leeway to make up. When do we move against M'ganga?"

"As soon as we are in touch with the Indian crush," replied Danvers. "It may be tomorrow."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Spofforth. "Let's hope it will be a decent scrap, and that von Gobendorff will be present at the meeting."

CHAPTER XI

THE SNIPER

It was not until thirty-six hours later that the Waffs moved out of camp for the purpose of delivering a surprise attack upon von Lindenfelt's position. From N'gere a strong force of Pathans, accompanied by a mule mountain battery, was marching in a north-easterly direction to cut off, if possible, the Huns' retreat, while the Rhodesian Light Horse was operating between M'ganga and the Karewenda Geberge in order to keep contact with any German troops likely to attempt to reinforce von Lindenfelt's garrison. To still further encompass the hostile position a force of Belgians was approaching from the westward. Even if these resolute and energetic troops failed to be in for the actual fighting, they would most effectually round up any stragglers, who would otherwise contrive to escape to the hinterland, where strong bands of Huns still maintained guerrilla tactics.

Almost as soon as it was light the seaplane rose from the surface of the river and flew westwards to note the respective dispositions of the other troops operating against M'ganga. In the absence of wireless Colonel Quarrier could receive the airmen's report only by means of a written message dropped from the seaplane, while before the storming troops were in position the airmen would have to return to their temporary base, replenish petrol and then fly off to bomb von Lindenfelt's stronghold.

Progress was slow as far as the Haussas were concerned.

Although there were no indications that the Huns expected an attack so promptly they had made certain preparations. The only approach from the south-east was by means of a narrow path through well-wooded and undulating country, and for miles from M'ganga the wily Germans had beset the road with pitfalls and booby-traps. There were caltrops by the hundred—sharp-pointed spikes stuck into the ground, their tips cunningly hidden by dead leaves—which were responsible for a few casualties as the Haussas' bare feet came in contact with the barbs. These devices the blacks countered by means of implements shaped like exaggerated hoes which they pushed in front of them.

Other defensive measures were heavy logs suspended by boughs overhanging the path by means of light but strong wires. An unwary footfall would release a catch which in turn would cause the baulk of timber to crash to the earth. There were old muskets, charged to bursting point with slugs and nails, which were fired by similar devices, while on three occasions fougasses, or land-mines, were exploded, fortunately without causing casualties. The Haussas, not to be outdone by their Askari foes, had taken the precaution of driving oxen well in front of the advance guard, and although six beasts had been killed by infernal machines, the troops succeeded in crossing the belt of forest with a loss of five men slightly wounded.

"The explosion of those fougasses has knocked on the head our chances of delivering a surprise attack," remarked the company commander to Wilmshurst. "It will be a frontal attack against a prepared foe. Let's hope the Huns won't bolt."

"That's the general opinion, sir," replied the subaltern. "The

men are simply longing for a scrap. Fritz has thrown away one good chance. He might have played Old Harry with us if he had posted a couple of companies in ambush in the forest."

"I wasn't sorry to get clear of the place," admitted the major. "A hundred men might have been lying in wait in those underglades and our flankers wouldn't spot 'em. Hullo, here's the seaplane."

Flying at a comparatively low altitude the machine approached rapidly "down wind." In the clear atmosphere the concentric red, white, and blue circles that indicated its nationality were visible from a great distance, while presently the features of the observer could be distinguished as he leant over the side of the fuselage.

Presently a small object to which coloured streamers were attached was dropped from the seaplane. Greatly to the curiosity of the blacks, who watched the descending message with undisguised wonderment, the object did not explode on reaching the ground as they fully expected it to do; and it was with an absurd display of caution that Tari Barl and Blue Fly went to receive it.

"The C.O—sharp!" ordered Wilmshurst. "Don't hold the thing like a snake—it won't bite."

Tari Barl departed on his errand, and returned presently, looking very crestfallen.

"What's wrong, Tarry Barrel?" asked the subaltern.

"Colonel him call me one time fool, sah," he reported. "Him

tell you come see him all in dashed hurry quick."

"I wonder what Tarry Barrel has been doing?" thought Dudley as he hastened to report to his C.O.

Colonel Quarrier was laughing, so were the adjutant and the regimental sergeant-major. In the former's hand was the unrolled scrap of paper on which the airmen's message was written.

"It's all right, after all, Mr. Wilmshurst," said the colonel. "Your runner is a bit of a blockhead, as I think you'll admit. Evidently under the impression that these coloured ribbons were a present to me from the skies, he handed over the streamers, while the case containing the writing, which had been soiled when it fell to the ground, he carefully cut off and threw away. As you are here you may as well inform your company commander the news: the —th and —th Pathans are in their prearranged positions. There will be a twenty-minutes' bombardment by the mountain battery in conjunction with an attack by the seaplane. At four forty-five the Waffs will advance in three lines to the assault. That's all, Mr. Wilmshurst."

The subaltern saluted and withdrew. It was now three o'clock and an hour and three-quarters were to elapse before the battalion went into action.

"Looks as if we've cornered the beggars, Mr. Wilmshurst," remarked the major, when Dudley had communicated the C.O.'s message. "I suppose they are still there," he added.

The two officers searched the crest of the hill through their

field-glasses. So elaborate and skilful were the enemy defences that the powerful lenses failed to detect any trace of the rifle pits and sand-bagged parapets of the trenches. Nor were any troops visible. The top of the table-land looked as deserted as an unexplored land in the Polar regions.

Wilmshurst lowered his binoculars. He was about to make some reply when to the accompaniment of a shrill whistling sound his helmet was whisked from his head, falling to the ground a good ten feet from where he stood.

For some minutes the two officers regarded each other, the major anxiously the other whimsically.

"Hit?" asked the major laconically.

"No, sir," replied Wilmshurst.

"Jolly near squeak," continued the other. "I think we'll choose a little less exposed position to resume our observations."

Dudley retrieved his helmet. A couple of clean-cut holes marked the entry and exit of a bullet, the missile having missed the subaltern's head by a fraction of an inch.

"We've drawn their fire, sir," he exclaimed. "They are still there."

"A sniper at eight hundred yards, I should imagine," observed the company commander. "A jolly good shot for a Hun. We'll try our luck again."

Making their way to the depression in the ground where the Haussas of "A" and "B" Companies were lying, the two officers set a couple of men to work to rig up a dummy soldier. When complete the effigy was slowly moved so that from the hostile position it gave the appearance of a Haussa brazenly and defiantly moving out in the open, while a dozen officers swept the ground on their front with their field-glasses to try to detect the faint flash of a sniper's rifle.

A puff of smoke rose from behind a bush at a distance of half a mile, and almost immediately following the sharp crack of a rifle a bullet "knocked spots" off the effigy.

Without hesitation twenty or more Haussas let fly in the direction of the puff of smoke.

"What are you aiming at, men?" shouted the major.

The score of blacks grinned unanimously. In their minds they had no suspicion but that they had acted promptly and efficaciously.

Again the dummy was held aloft, and again the same thing happened.

"I've spotted him, sir!" exclaimed Wilmshurst. "Caught sight of the flash about fifty yards to the right. Fritz, old sport, you're exposed."

While the riflemen were keeping up a hot fire upon the bush that they supposed was concealing the sniper the company-commander ordered Bela Moshi to turn a machine gun upon the position that Wilmshurst had spotted.

Before twenty-four rounds had been let loose a man sprang three feet in the air, and fell inertly upon the ridge that had but imperfectly protected him.

"Dead as mutton," reported Wilmshurst, after bringing his glasses to bear upon the ill-starred Hun. "He nearly had me, though," he soliloquised, tentatively fingering the double perforation in his helmet.

There was no lack of volunteers to examine the sniper's lair. Regardless of the risk of being potted at by other enemy riflemen Bela Moshi, Tari Barl, and Spot Cash crept forward, taking advantage of every available bit of cover.

In twenty minutes the Haussas returned, reporting in characteristically native terms that the German's head had been literally riddled with the burst of bullets from the Maxim. They brought his rifle and ammunition, his field glasses and a small electric battery. In connection with the latter wires were run from the sniper's lair to the bush from which the puffs of smoke had been seen. Here small charges of black powder had been placed so as to be exploded from a safe distance and thus deceive the Haussas as to the rifleman's actual position. The Hun was a bit of a strategist, but he had overreached himself. It was the dense smoke from the black powder that had given him away. Had he used the so-called smokeless powder the Haussas might have expended hundreds of rounds without discovering the cheat.

Wilmshurst examined the weapon that had so nearly done him in. It was an improved Mauser, bearing the German Government proof mark and the date 1917, and was fitted with

the latest approved type of telescopic sight, while on the muzzle was fixed a small metal cylinder that effectually silenced the report.

"That's strange, sir," he remarked to the major. "We distinctly heard the report."

"We did," agreed the company commander. "I cannot understand it unless the Boche for some reason fired several rounds with the silencer removed. If so, why?"

Before the discussion could be carried further a dull, booming sound came from behind the table-land of M'ganga, while at a little height behind the German position appeared the mushroom-like cloud of white smoke as the shrapnel burst.

"Good!" ejaculated the company commander, replacing his binoculars. "We've had the orchestral selection; the curtain rises on the First Act."

CHAPTER XII

THE STORMING OF M'GANGA

A loud whirring noise audible above the distant cannonade announced that the seaplane was passing overhead to participate in the strafing of Fritz. Of necessity the airmen had to fly high in order to avoid being hit by the British shrapnel, but the summit of M'Ganga offered a big target and the bombs were soon dropping merrily upon the trenches, dug-outs, and storehouses of von Lindenfelt's position.

In a very few minutes the table-land was enveloped in a piebald pall of smoke, yet no return fire came from the two 4.1 inch guns that were known to be with von Lindenfelt's column. Apart from the bursting shells and bombs there were no evidences of movement in the Huns' stronghold—a circumstance that caused the Waff officers to wonder deeply and mutter under their breath.

"Fix bayonets!"

The sharp click of the weapons being fixed to the rifles rattled along the line of excited Haussas. Then in open order the blacks hurried forward to take cover. Nor did any hostile bullet seek to check their progress. Without hindrance the black and khaki steel-tipped line gained a pre-arranged position within four hundred yards of the base of M'Ganga plateau.

Here the men were halted to take a "breather" before

essaying the final task, while the company officers foregathered, consulting their synchronised watches. In another ten minutes—five minutes before the time for the bombardment to cease—the Haussas were to start on their desperate frontal attack.

"How goes it?" enquired Wilmshurst of Jock Spofforth, as the giant strolled leisurely across from the platoon.

"Rotten," admitted the other candidly. His big fingers were trembling slightly as he applied a match to a cigarette. "First time going into action, you know. It's the hanging about business that gets on a fellow's nerves."

"You'll be all right when the advance sounds," declared Dudley. "I felt like it once."

"Simply had to stroll over and have a palaver with you," continued Spofforth. "I was afraid that my men would spot my hands trembling. Hope the Boches are standing. Hang it all! Why did nature let me grow to this height?"

Spofforth was laughing now. The mental tension of the seemingly interminable wait was over.

"Two minutes more—hop it, old man," cautioned Wilmshurst. "The best of luck."

The whistles sounded. Almost immediately, as if by some uncanny means the distant gunners saw that the infantry were in motion, the strafe ceased. Overhead the seaplane still circled. The bomb-dropping part of their task completed the airmen lingered to watch the advance, and if occasion offered

to assist the storming troops by means of their Lewis gun.

The natural features of the face of the plateau made the ascent a difficult one. Often the Haussas had to climb upon their comrades' shoulders, and in return help them to surmount an awkward terrace; yet everything considered the triple line was well maintained, the blacks needing no encouragement from their white officers, who, perspiring freely in every pore, were well ahead of their men.

The summit at last. Well-nigh breathless, Wilmshurst, although by no means the first, drew himself over the rocky edge of the table-land to find the ground plentifully sprinkled with barbed wire entanglements. Although this form of defence had been badly knocked about by shell-fire there was still sufficient wire, either in tension or else in snake-like coils, to offer serious impediment to the advance.

Suddenly the opening shot of a ragged, ill-aimed fusillade burst from a line of zig-zagged trenches a hundred yards from the edge of the plateau. A Haussa, in the act of assisting a comrade, sprang high in the air, and fell, his hands in his death-agony clutching at Wilmshurst's ankles.

Without knowing what trapped him the subaltern measured his length on the ground. Probably the fall saved his life, for a corporal immediately behind him was shot through the chest.

"Prone position—independent firing," shouted the major, realising that it was a forlorn hope for a few men to charge. Until a sufficient number of bayonets was on the plateau a forward movement was out of the question.

Coolly the Haussas threw themselves on the ground, taking advantage of every scrap of cover. To the accompaniment of the constant whip-like cracks of the rifles other blacks clambered upon the fairly level ground until three companies were in readiness to continue the advance.

Again the whistle sounded. The crowd of prostrate Haussas rose to their feet, yelling and shouting as they lurched forward with levelled bayonets. Men fell almost unheeded as the Waffs forced their way through the gaps in the barbed wire, and swept right and left to avoid the shell craters. By this means platoons became intermingled, while companies overlapped each other, but steadily the onward rush continued.

The Askaris in the first line of trenches did not wait. The sight of the tips of the glittering bayonets was too much for their courage. Their fire ceased; they turned and scurried over the parados, followed by bullets from the Haussas and met by bullets from their German task-masters, who had taken the precaution of stiffening their native levies with a lead ration should they show signs of weakening.

In this predicament the Askaris halted and faced about. Already the Haussas were astride the first trench and interlocked with the nearmost of their foes, the while a German machine gun was playing on the combatants with the delightful impartiality that a Hun displays to save his own hide.

Temporarily the Haussas' charge was checked. The machine gun was playing havoc with them. Then, suddenly, the ominous tic-tac ceased, while overhead came the pop-pop-pop of the seaplane's automatic gun. It was more than the Huns had

bargained for. Some dived into underground retreats, others bolted, showing a clean pair of heels to the Askaris, who were now resisting valiantly.

In the mêlée Wilmshurst found himself attacked by three muscular natives, who for some reason did not attempt to fire, but fought with their rifles and bayonets.

One the subaltern shot with the last cartridge in his revolver. Hurling the empty weapon at the head of the second—which the Askari avoided by adroitly stepping aside—Dudley parried a bayonet-thrust with the sole weapon at his disposal, a "loaded" trench-stick. As he did so the second native closed, delivering a thrust that drove the bayonet through the left sleeve of the subaltern's tunic. Before the man could recover his weapon, Wilmshurst brought the heavy stick down upon his fingers.

Dropping his rifle the Askari gripped the subaltern's wrist with his uninjured right hand, while a third native ran in to drive his bayonet through the young officer's chest.

A deafening report sounded close to Wilmshurst's ear; he felt the blast of a rifle shot on his cheek, but he had the satisfaction of seeing the Askari topple forward and bite the dust.

Wilmshurst settled the third antagonist very effectively by delivering a crashing blow with his left upon the point of the Askari's chin. The man relaxed his grip and dropped.

"Thanks, Bela Moshi!" exclaimed Wilmshurst, catching sight of the sergeant as the latter thrust a fresh clip of

cartridges into his magazine.

The struggle in this part of the line was now over. The Haussas were engaged in firing shots into the dug-outs to intimidate their German occupants. Fifty or sixty prisoners were being disarmed and rounded up, while the wounded had to be given attention.

Wilmshurst, picking up his revolver and reloading it, looked around for his brother subalterns. There was big Jock Spofforth in the act of putting a first-aid dressing round a bullet wound in Danvers' arm, while Laxdale was sitting on the ground and nursing his left foot.

There was no time to make enquiries just then. It was satisfactory to learn that all the officers of "A" Company were alive; those who were wounded were making light of their hurts. On the right flank the struggle was still in progress, and until all resistance was at an end Wilmshurst had no time for other things.

Acting upon his company commander's orders the subaltern took charge of the task of clearing out the dug-outs, while the remaining platoons of "A" and "B" Companies re-formed, and hastened to the support of their comrades who were still hotly engaged.

"If we only had a supply of bombs!" thought Dudley as he watched the ineffectual attempt of his men to induce the occupants of a deep shelter to surrender.

Half a dozen Haussas were gathered round the entrance firing volleys into the cavernous depths, and punctuating the

fusillade by quaintly-worded threats of what they would do if the Bosh-bosh didn't "show hand up one time bery much quick."

Bidding his men be silent, Wilmshurst demanded the surrender of the Germans in the dug-out. Hearing a British officer's voice one of the Huns replied defiantly:

"We no surrender make to a schweinhund Englander. We food haf for six week, an' you cannot hurt us."

"Can't we, by Jove!" replied Wilmshurst. "Sergeant, bring along that box of bombs."

"Bery good, sah," said Bela Moshi, grinning as he hurried away a few steps on a phantom errand.

"Now, then," continued the subaltern. "I give you one minute to make up your minds; if you refuse to surrender we'll blow you to blazes. I take the time from now."

Half a minute passed in absolute silence as far as the vicinity of the dug-out was concerned, although three or four hundred yards away the desultory firing still continued. Three quarters of a minute: there was a shuffling sound from the subterranean retreat and the guttural voice of several Huns engaged in excited debate.

"Fifty seconds!" announced Wilmshurst. "Ten seconds more."

"Do not t'row der pomb; we surrender make!" implored a voice.

"Out you come, then; one at a time," ordered Dudley.

With his revolver ready for instant action should the Huns display any signs of treachery the subaltern awaited the appearance of his captives, while the Haussas stood by to back up their young officer should necessity arise.

The first to appear was the junior lieutenant, looking very scared. Finding that nothing occurred to cause him physical hurt he held his arms high above his head, at the same time saying something to his unseen companions.

Then came Hauptmann von Argerlich, pale-faced under his sun-burnt complexion. He had good cause to feel afraid, for he was by no means uncertain that the British possessed a record of his deeds—deeds that might be worthy of the German arms, but certainly would not be regarded with any degree of favour by nations with any respectable code of honour. Poisoning wells, for example, was quite a favourite and pleasant Hun trick when the perpetrators of the outrage were all able to place a safe distance between them and their foes; it was quite another matter when the officer responsible for the dastardly deeds was a prisoner of war.

Three more Germans followed, and then came a full-faced, double-chinned Prussian, wearing an order on his cotton drill uniform. In his hand he held a sheathed sword, the scabbard of which had already been unfastened from the slings.

"I am Commandant Hendrich von Lindenfelt," he announced as captor and captive exchanged salutes. "I make surrender and claim der treatment due to der brisoners of war."

"That'll be all right," rejoined Wilmshurst. "Please keep your sword until the colonel decides—I mean, until you are taken to Colonel Quarrier of the Nth Waffs. Are all the German officers here?"

"Yes," replied von Lindenfelt. "All except those who killed and wounded are."

"I am anxious to find a certain individual known as von Gobendorff," continued the British subaltern. "Can you give me any information concerning him?"

The oberst seemed considerably taken aback.

"I do not know any person so called," he replied after a slight hesitation.

"Think again, Herr von Lindenfelt," prompted Wilmshurst. "The man we want is von Gobendorff, otherwise known as Robert MacGregor, and is known to have belonged to the forces under your command."

Von Lindenfelt shook his head, this time resolutely and defiantly.

"I do know not," he declared.

It was practically useless to press the question. There were, Wilmshurst argued, other means of finding out.

Setting a guard over the prisoners Dudley sent a file of Haussas to explore the dug-out. In less than a minute the corporal returned.

"Number one big hole, sah," he reported. "Me no find no one time man in no place."

As a result of this somewhat mystifying intelligence Wilmshurst entered the dug-out. Descending a flight of a dozen wooden steps he gained the ante-room, a space fifteen feet in length and about seven in breadth. It was absolutely proof against the heaviest gun employed in the German East campaign, while, as a safeguard against bombs that might be lobbed into their retreat, the door of the second room was protected by a wall of sandbags backed with massive slabs of African teak.

By the aid of flaming brands held by the blacks Wilmshurst was able to make a rapid, but none the less complete examination of the shelter. Evidently it was the headquarters dug-out, judging by the smashed telephone, the pile of broken instruments, and the heap of paper ash that littered the floor.

At the subaltern's order the blacks prodded the walls with their bayonets and hammered the floor with the butt ends of their rifles, but no suspicion of the existence of a concealed "funk-hole" was to be traced.

"Precious little here," commented Wilmshurst. "I'll have to keep the place open for the colonel's inspection, I suppose."

Regaining the open air he posted a sentry over the entrance and, collecting the German prisoners, awaited the arrival of the C.O.

By this time all resistance on the summit of M'ganga was over. Away to the north-east came occasional reports of rifle-

firing, showing that the Pathans and the Rhodesian horse were engaging the fugitives.

The one fly in the ointment was the escape of von Gobendorff. There was, of course, the possibility that he had been shot or had contrived to slip away during the action. In the latter case he had the cordon of troops to take into consideration; but knowing the wiliness of the man and the fluency with which he spoke English, Dudley began to feel rather dubious concerning the Hun's apprehension.

Otherwise the brilliant little affair was highly successful. Practically the whole of von Linderfelt's staff had been either killed or captured; most of the Germans in the firing-line had shared a similar fate, while the surviving Askaris were either captured or had escaped in small numbers through the lines of the encircling forces.

Von Lindenfelt had not counted upon the use of light artillery against his strong position, but the fire of the mountain batteries, assisted by the seaplane's bombs, had proved terribly destructive. Of the 4.1-inch guns mounted for the defence not one remained intact, their destruction materially helping the Waffs in their frontal attack. A considerable quantity of military stores also fell into the hands of the victors, much of the booty being found upon examination to have been sent to German East Africa during the last three months.

As a result of the operation a large hostile column operating in the neighbourhood of the Rovuma had ceased to exist. There were other roving forces still in the district, and against these the Haussas were to operate in conjunction with other

detachments.

"It's all right when we catch Fritz sitting," remarked Spofforth. "The trouble is that he strongly objects to be caught. We'll have to chase him from the Rovuma to Kilimanjaro and back before we square up this business."

"And, even then, corner him in Cape Town," added Danvers facetiously. "I can see myself spending my seventieth birthday on this job."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FUGITIVE

On the evening of the capture of M'ganga a white man, fatigued and desperately hungry, stood irresolute upon the banks of the Kiwa River, roughly forty miles from the scene of the Waffs' successful operations.

It would have been a difficult matter to recognise in the jaded man the once well-set-up individual known in certain quarters as Robert MacGregor; nor was there much resemblance between the fugitive and the German secret service agent, Ulrich von Gobendorff—yet the man was none other than he whom the officers of the Haussa regiment particularly wished to lay by the heels.

By a series of hair-breadth escapes von Gobendorff had succeeded in making his way past the Pathan infantry picquets. For twenty minutes he had crouched up to his neck in the miasmatic waters of a forest pool, with thousands of mosquitoes buzzing round his unprotected head, while a patrol of the Rhodesian Light Horse halted within twenty yards of his place of concealment.

And now, with a strip of linen tied round his head, a ragged cotton shirt, a pair of "shorts" that were hardly any protection from the thorny cacti, and a pair of badly-worn "veldt schoen" as the sum total of his clothing and footgear von Gobendorff awaited the fall of night in the depths of a tropical forest.

His limbs were covered with scratches that were causing him intense pain and irritation; his face was swollen under the attacks of mosquitoes, until his bloodshot eyes were hardly visible above his puffed up cheeks. Unarmed with the exception of an automatic pistol, he was about to brave the dangers of a night 'midst malarial mists and wild beasts of an African forest.

As the sun sank von Gobendorff collected a heap of wood and leaves and kindled a fire. For the present he judged that he was practically free from pursuit. In any case he would take the risk of lighting a fire. It was not likely that British patrols would be wandering through the dense tropical vegetation during the hours of darkness.

Under the wide-spreading branches of a baobab the Hun was able to make one fire serve his purpose. Ordinarily he would have lighted three or four at a distance of five or six yards from each other, and thus found comparative immunity from the attacks of lions and hippos, but the baobab—it reminded him of a certain incident when he was "attached" to the Haussas—was able to protect both rear and flank from the voracious assaults of any four-footed creatures.

As the fire blazed brightly von Gobendorff consumed his last ration—a small cube of highly-concentrated food, which he had in his possession on the development of the attack on M'ganga. Throughout his flight, although tormented with the pangs of hunger, he had resolutely refused to draw upon his scanty commissariat. And now it was eaten: for the rest of his journey he would have to depend upon his wits to obtain food. Rather grimly he reflected that an automatic .302, although an

efficient "man-stopper" in a *mêlée*, was not to be compared with a rifle as a means of procuring food.

Although inured to exposure in a tropical country von Gobendorff was feeling severely the effect of the sun upon his insufficiently protected limbs. In the rapidly cooling air his blistered skin was stretched so tightly that every movement of his neck, arms and legs gave him intense pain. The mosquitoes, owing to the glare of the burning wood, had ceased their attacks, but the effect of their previous onslaughts was greatly in evidence.

Slowly and carefully lying down on a pile of broad leaves the Hun tried to fall asleep, but in vain. Racked in every limb, his head throbbing as if it harboured a rapidly working piston, he endured—waiting for the dawn that would give him no respite from his torments.

Presently the denizens of the forest began their nocturnal activities. In the sluggishly-flowing river hippopotami floundered noisily. Elephants crashed through the brushwood making their way to the water, while at intervals rhinoceri and bush-cows charged blindly past the fiercely burning fire. Von Gobendorff was in a big game hunter's paradise, but he failed utterly to show enthusiasm at the prospect.

At intervals he crawled to his reserve stock of fuel to replenish the fire, knowing that if he allowed the comforting and protecting flame to die out he stood an almost certain chance of falling a victim to a four-footed foe. Once a large bush-cow thundered almost through the blazing logs, bellowing frantically as a panther with its claws deeply dug

into the huge brute's hide was remorselessly tearing at the throat of its prey.

Monkeys, too, huge simians looking human-like in the dull red glare, came shuffling from the shadow of the neighbouring trees to gaze fixedly at the unusual sight of a fire. Muttering, chattering and gesticulating they watched the Hun's bivouac for several minutes until the sudden spring of a large cat-like animal claimed one victim and sent the rest of the monkeys flying for their lives.

With the first streak of dawn the nocturnal Bacchanalia ceased. Von Gobendorff, who had longed for the break of day in order to resume his flight to a supposedly safe refuge in the Karewenda Hills, found himself unable to resist the sleep of utter exhaustion, and as the last faint wreath of pale grey smoke rose from the dying embers he dropped into a deep slumber.

He awoke to find the glade bathed in brilliant sunshine. The sun was almost overhead, while he himself was lying in the dense shadow cast by the overspreading branches of the baobab. Through an opening in the otherwise dense foliage he could see the river rippling in the dazzling light, while partly hauled up the bank and partly resting between the reeds was a canoe—a dug-out of about twenty-five feet in length.

"Himmel!" muttered the German. "This is indeed good fortune."

The means of crossing the broad Kiwa River was at his command. He had made up his mind on the previous evening

to risk a horrible death by attempting to swim the stream. He had seen what appeared to be logs drifting silently with the eddying current—logs that on the approach of danger would reveal themselves in their true characters, for the river swarmed with hippopotami.

Von Gobendorff was on the point of issuing from his retreat when the sound of voices and the rustling of the brushwood warned him that the owners of the canoe were returning.

Listening intently he recognised the dialect as that of the Birwas—a native tribe occupying a considerable tract of the hinterland. He knew the language well—he had the Hun's typical capability of acquiring a knowledge of foreign tongues.

Presently the blacks came in sight—two lithe and stalwart natives armed with primitive bow and spear. One man carried the hindquarters of a gnu, the other had a brace of birds dangling from the haft of his spear.

With an effort von Gobendorff pulled himself together and strode boldly into the open.

Halting, he signed imperiously to the Birwas to approach.

The blacks obeyed promptly. Experience had taught them to carry out the behests of their German masters with the utmost celerity. With every indication of abasement they approached and awaited the white man's orders.

Von Gobendorff pointed to the still warm embers of the fire.

"I am hungry," he said. "Get me something to eat and drink,

and be sharp."

While one of the Birwas cut strips of flesh from the gnu and spitted them on skewers, the other placed more wood on the fire and coaxed it into a blaze. The grilling operation in progress the fire-tender ran to the canoe to return with a couple of small gourds of water, some dried berries somewhat resembling coffee beans and a flat cake of mealie bread.

Von Gobendorff soon discovered that the natives had been serving in the German outpost at G'henge, a position overrun and captured by a Sikh battalion about three months previously. They had, they declared, been very well treated by their new masters.

The fugitive smiled grimly, immediately wincing as the movement of the facial muscles gave him a thrill of pain. It was evident, he reasoned, that the Birwas had mistaken him for an officer of the British forces.

Hardly able to wait until the meal was prepared von Gobendorff turned to and ate with avidity, washing down the food with copious draughts of hot and far from palatable beverage. Having refreshed he ordered the blacks to hide all traces of his bivouac and made them carry him to the canoe. He realised how imperative it was that he should cover his tracks, and by no means the least important measure was to prevent any prints of his veldt schoen being discovered on the moist marshland on the river bank.

"Take me to Kossa," ordered von Gobendorff, naming a small military post on the Kiwa about thirty miles down the

river, and at a point where the stream made a semi-circular bend before running in a south-westerly direction to join the Rovuma.

For the first time the Birwas demurred.

"There are strong rapids a little distance down stream," declared one. "We are not skilled in working a canoe. Can we not take you across to our village, where there are plenty of men who will paddle you to Kossa?"

"My word," said von Gobendorff, "is law."

To add greater emphasis to his words he produced his automatic pistol. The argument was conclusive. With every indication of fear the two natives pushed off, and seizing the paddles they propelled the unwieldy craft down stream.

Compared with his previous mode of travelling the Hun found the journey bordering almost upon the luxurious. He would have preferred a cushion, a double helmet and a sun-umbrella with a canopy thrown in, but reflecting that he was fortunate in being able to tackle the Kiwa without having to resort to swimming, he endured the glare with comparative equanimity.

Concerning the perils of the rapids he decided to take his chances. It was just possible that the Birwas had lied, hoping to deter him from his purpose. That they were fairly experienced in the art of canoeing was evident by the way in which they skilfully avoided the numerous hippopotami, their broad-bladed paddles entering the water without the faintest suspicion of a splash.

Whenever, as frequently happened, the canoe passed a native village von Gobendorff, no doubt with the loss of a certain amount of prestige, took up a position at full length at the bottom of the canoe, strictly warning his boatmen that they were to maintain absolute silence as far as his presence was concerned.

The canoe had barely passed a small collection of huts when the two Birwas began to jabber vociferously, pointing at an object a hundred yards ahead.

"Why this noise?" demanded von Gobendorff, who understood the cause of the conversation. "You have passed dozens of 'river-cows' before?"

"This one is awake and furious," replied one of the natives. "We sought to keep to the bank, and the animal has seen us."

The Hun sat up and drew his pistol. A brief glance on either hand showed that there were no signs of escape by running the canoe ashore. The banks were here quite twenty feet in height, precipitous and topped with dense vegetation. There was deep water close to land, while in mid-stream a mud-bank just showed above the swirling current.

"Go on!" he ordered.

The men plied their paddles vigorously. Although the heavily-constructed canoe was incapable of any great speed, and was also undermanned, the commotion of the paddles and the frantic shouts of the two blacks made up for the lack of manoeuvring powers. The hippo dived. The canoe shot past.

Von Gobendorff breathed freely, but he was too premature. The hippopotamus reappeared amidst a smother of foam. Its wide-open jaws closed up on the gunwale of the dug-out.

The canoe listed dangerously. The Birwas still further endangered its stability by standing upright and raining absolutely ineffectual blows with their paddles upon the armour-plated head of the amphibian. The air in the vicinity of the heeling craft was thick with spray and flying fragments of woodwork.

Raising his pistol von Gobendorff placed the muzzle within an inch of the hippo's right eye, and fired two shots in quick succession. Then, without waiting to observe the effect, he put two bullets into the animal's left eye.

With a stupendous jerk that dipped the badly shattered gunwale under the water the hippo relaxed its grip and disappeared. Whether mortally wounded or not there were no means of ascertaining, but the brute was seen no more.

Throwing their paddles into the bottom of the canoe the two natives, crouching on the uninjured side to keep the jagged hole above the surface, plied their gourds frantically in order to get rid of the quantity of water that had poured over the gunwale. This task having been completed von Gobendorff noticed with a certain amount of apprehension that the freeboards betwixt the edge of the gaping hole and the water was less than four inches.

In the excitement of the encounter the Hun had overlooked the fact that already the canoe was within the influence of the

rapids. The Birwas had spoken truly—there were cataracts; what was more there was now no means of avoiding them.

The banks on either hand were still steep and precipitous, while, undermanned, the heavy canoe could not be propelled against the stream, the speed of which exceeded five miles per hour and was steadily increasing as the rapids drew nearer and nearer.

The thunder of the foaming water could now be heard distinctly, as the canoe, held in the inexorable grip of the swirling torrent, swayed towards the danger. The two natives realised their peril. Their black faces were suffused with an ashy grey hue; their eyes were wide open with fear.

"Paddle backwards!" ordered von Gobendorff, knowing that to attempt to turn the canoe would mean both loss of time and increased chances of being immediately swamped.

With every muscle strained to its utmost capacity the Birwas strove desperately to back up-stream. Anxiously von Gobendorff kept his eyes fixed upon a mark in the bank. For a few minutes he watched—then he muttered curses under his breath. The canoe was slowly yet surely losing ground. He was fully aware that, apart from its damaged condition, the cumbersome craft stood no possible chance of escape in the maelstrom-like eddies of the rapids, unless by sheer good fortune combined with the skill of the two natives the canoe could be made to avoid the jagged rocks between which the waters of the Kiwa rushed.

Suddenly the German caught sight of a huge teak-tree that,

having been uprooted, was trailing over the banks. It was a faint chance, but von Gobendorff decided to risk it.

Raising his hand he pointed towards the tree-trunk. Already the roar of the water made it impossible for the Birwas to hear him speak. The men nodded and again began to ply their paddles vigorously, keeping close to the border between the main stream and a back-eddy by this part of the right bank.

With a quick turn of his broad blade the bowman urged the canoe's bows diagonally against the mass of timber. Caught by the full force of the current the dug-out swung round, crashed against the tree and, listing, was immediately swamped by the inrush of water.

Von Gobendorff leapt to safety. With cat-like agility he swarmed up the inclined bank. Here he stood and waited, watching the efforts of the two natives to save themselves.

The bowman had succeeded in getting astride the massive log and was endeavouring to extricate his companion from the peril that threatened him, for the other had been thrown out of the canoe and was pinned between the tree and the side of the water-logged craft.

In spite of the Birwa's most strenuous efforts the trapped man was unable to extricate himself from the vice-like grip, for edges of the jagged hole in the canoe's side were pressing hard against his thigh, while the canoe itself, forced against the tree-trunk by the swiftly-running current, could not be moved in spite of the combined efforts of the two blacks.

A third man would have made all the difference. The

trapped Birwa raised his eyes appealingly to the white man, but von Gobendorff stirred not so much as a little finger.

The Hun, having no further use for the natives, was merely awaiting the catastrophe that would effectually cover his tracks. Without the need of further aid from the Birwas he was now within measurable distance of the Karewenda Hills. Another six hours ought to find him in at least the temporary shelter of the German fortified post of Twashi.

With a sardonic expression on his face von Gobendorff waited and watched. For a full five minutes the grim struggle was maintained. The trapped Birwa's strength was fast failing. Already greatly exhausted by his strenuous work with the paddle he was rapidly collapsing under the strain.

Suddenly he relaxed his grip. The water-logged canoe dipped, and was swept under the tree, taking with it the doomed native, whose last despairing cry was drowned in the roar of the rushing river. For a few moments the surviving Birwa remained kneeling on the inclined mass of timber, trembling in every limb, then, slowly and with every sign of temerity he began to make his way up the trunk to dry land.

Raising his pistol the Hun fired straight at the man's head. The Birwa's arms collapsed, he fell at full length upon the rounded mass of timber, and, slipping sideways, toppled inertly into the foaming torrent.

"Hamba gachle!" exclaimed von Gobendorff, using a Zulu expression that he had picked up in his many and diverse wanderings through South and Central Africa. "Dead men tell

no tales, and you were in my way."

Then, recharging the magazine of his automatic pistol, the German turned, and, setting his face towards the north-west, strode rapidly towards the Karewenda Hills.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE TRACK

"Mr. Wilmshurst, I shall require you to proceed on special service," said Colonel Quarrier.

"Very good, sir," replied Dudley promptly, and awaited the C.O.'s instructions.

It was the evening of the fall of M'ganga. The prisoners had been collected and were about to be sent under escort to Kilwa. Fully under the impression that he was to be detailed for this monotonous but necessary duty Wilmshurst had reported himself to his colonel, but to his intense satisfaction he soon found that such was not the C.O.'s intention.

"Concerning this MacGregor-Gobendorff fellow," continued Colonel Quarrier. "It seems as if he has slipped through our fingers. We have been robbed of much of the satisfaction of capturing the position on that account. The Rhodesian Light Horse patrols are all back and report no luck as far as the capture of von Gobendorff is concerned, and the same applies to the Indian troops. From some of the prisoners we learnt that the fellow slipped away during the preliminary bombardment, and that he was not mounted. I have arranged with Colonel Mopesson, of the Light Horse, for a mounted patrol to be sent in pursuit, and since it is desirable for some one to identify the Hun—it sounds like counting our chickens before they are hatched, by the bye—I propose that you accompany the Rhodesians."

"Yes, sir," replied the subaltern.

"Very good. You have half an hour to make preparations," resumed the C.O. "Take a batman with you—a man who can ride well. You will rejoin your battalion at Kossa in three days' time, circumstances permitting."

Wilmshurst saluted and withdrew to make his brief preparations. Having given Tari Barl instructions to pack his kit the subaltern sent for Sergeant Bela Moshi.

"Find me a man who can ride well," he said.

A broad grin overspread the Haussa non-com.'s face.

"No go for look, sah," he replied. "Me know one time quick. Good man; him ride like de wind."

"Then bring him here," continued Wilmshurst.

"Him here, sah—me, Bela Moshi."

"I didn't know that you could ride," remarked the subaltern dubiously, fancying that Bela Moshi in his desire to accompany him was inventing a fairy tale concerning his equestrian abilities.

"Me one-time groom in Freetown, sah," declared Bela Moshi. "Me lib for ride any old hoss till him bust."

"I'll try you," announced Wilmshurst. "If you are wasting my time look out for squalls."

At the lines where the horses were picketed the Haussa picked out a powerful-looking brute—a "salted" Cape horse which had shown considerable temper at previous times.

Vaulting upon the animal Bela Moshi rode it barebacked, urging it at a gallop and finishing by taking a formidable obstacle in the shape of a cactus-bush.

"How can do, sah?" he asked.

"Good enough," replied Wilmshurst. "Cut off and pack your kit. We have only ten minutes."

Well within the time specified the Haussa was ready for the trek, his kit consisting of a blanket, rifle and ammunition, a haversack and his cooking utensils. In addition he carried his master's water-filter and a light waterproof tent weighing together with the socketed poles a little over two pounds.

"Good luck, old man!" exclaimed Spofforth, as his brother subaltern rode off to join the patrol. "Kindest regards to MacGregor when you meet him. Tell him how awfully delighted all of us will be to see him."

Wilmshurst's new comrades were all men of the Rhodesian farmer type, well set-up, sturdy, independent and resourceful—a band of chums voluntarily taken from their homesteads to render them immune from invasion by tackling the Hun on his own ground.

All were splendidly mounted on horses inured to the miasmic climate, "led" animals carrying their necessary equipment. Each man knew how to take care of himself. He

knew only the elementary principles of drill, but was none the less a very tough proposition for a Hun to tackle. Skilled in woodcraft and travelling, able to cover great distances with the minimum of fatigue, and capable of going on short rations without loss of efficiency the Rhodesians were ideal men for the work on hand. One and all had a score to wipe off; though few, if any, had fallen in with von Gobendorff they deeply resented the Hun's audacity in posing as a Rhodesian, while those who were of Scots descent and bore Scottish names were highly indignant at the idea of a German adopting the honourable and ancient cognomen of MacGregor.

Through the far-flung Pathan outposts they passed and rode into the night. Scores of Askaris, who had thrown away their arms, signified their willingness to surrender. Some were questioned concerning the flight of von Gobendorff, their replies confirming the reports of the prisoners taken at M'ganga; and the surrendered men were ordered to return and give themselves up to the Indian troops, since the main objective of the patrol was the pursuit of the spy, von Gobendorff.

That night the patrol bivouacked a short distance from a native kraal, the inhabitants of which gave them a warm, demonstrative and noisy welcome, at the same time providing them with a goat, plenty of mealies and water. Enquiries elicited the information that a party of villagers had seen a white man hurrying through the bush, and fortunately had not given any indication of their presence. According to the natives' report the fugitive was making in a north-westerly direction.

"He'll have his work cut out to cross the Kiwa," declared the sergeant of the patrol. "The river's pretty full just now and swarms of hippos. I doubt whether he'll tackle it at night."

"In that case we'll boot and saddle an hour before sunrise," declared Wilmshurst. "My man, Bela Moshi, will be able to follow the spoor like a cat.... Oh, yes, light as many fires as you like. Von Gobendorff is too far away to see the glare."

The night passed quietly. Although there were wild animals prowling round they kept a respectful distance. Men in pairs took turn in keeping watch, their comrades lying wrapped in blankets, with their feet towards the fire, each with his loaded rifle by his side.

After a good meal, consisting of roast goat's-flesh, millet bread and hot chocolate, the trek was resumed, the Haussa following the spoor with the sagacity and skill of a sleuth-hound until it was light enough to enable the Rhodesians to follow up the trail.

After a distance of five miles had been covered the patrol halted in perplexity, for, seemingly from nowhere another spoor joined that of the one they were following. There were distinct imprints of two men walking—one wearing veldt-schoen, the other the heavy marching boot supplied to the German colonial units.

The latter was of slightly recent origin, as witnessed by the fact that here and there the footprints of the boots had partly obliterated those of the veldt-schoen.

"It strikes me we've only just tumbled on the right spoor,"

declared a Rhodesian. "Of the two I should imagine von Gobendorff was wearing military boots. I suppose you didn't happen to notice what he wore while he was attached to the Waffs?"

"Boots and gaiters," replied Wilmshurst. "But, of course, that was some time ago."

"And boots are scarce in this show," rejoined the other tentatively. "When a man gets used to wearing a certain pair he's not likely to discard them in a hurry. I'll bet that is von Gobendorff's trail."

"And the other?" asked Dudley.

"A nigger might be wearing veldt-schoen," suggested another Rhodesian. "Perhaps he looted them, and in his natural vanity, decided to put them on instead of slinging them round his neck. In my experience I find that a native 'boy' will wear veldt-schoen, but he'll draw the line at boots."

"In any case," remarked Wilmshurst, "the two spoors lead the same way, so we'll carry on."

Half a mile further the tracks separated, the older ones continuing straight on, those of the boots breaking away to the left.

After a brief debate the pursuers decided to follow the latter spoor. This they followed for another four miles until it vanished on an expanse of hard, sun-baked ground.

"We're close to the Kiwa," announced one of the patrol, who

had pushed on ahead for fifty yards. "There's a kraal over yonder, and I can see the water between the trees."

Into the native village the pursuers rode, to hear a tale of woe from the headman. An armed German had passed through not an hour previously. He had demanded food and native beer; he had made no attempt to pay for the articles, and out of sheer mischief had set fire to a hut. Commandeering a canoe he had compelled the natives to ferry him across the river, and the four blacks who manned the craft had just returned with the news that he had gone into the bush.

"What was the German like?" asked a Rhodesian, who spoke the language of the natives with the utmost fluency.

The headman began to give an elaborate and detailed description, but it was soon evident that the pursuers were on the wrong track.

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Wilmshurst impetuously. "We've lost the fellow—what's that, Bela Moshi?"

"Go ober dem water one-time quick, sah; den you catch Bosh-bosh as him go for run away."

"That's a smart idea," declared Dudley, never backward in giving credit for other persons' ideas.

"Quite good," agreed the section commander of the patrol. "Over we go; the horses will have to swim."

Borrowing a couple of canoes the pursuers stepped into the cumbersome craft, four men in each had their loaded rifles

ready to fire at any hippos that might attack the horses; the others, grasping the reins of the well-trained animals, guided them across.

The passage of the Kiwa—which was here about one hundred and twenty yards in breadth—was performed without mishap, in spite of the fact that the current ran at a speed of two knots, for the spot where the crossing was effected was two miles below the rapids that had all but claimed von Gobendorff as a victim.

Just as the second canoe was running aground one of the natives uttered a cry of surprise, and pointed to a water-logged dug-out drifting broadside on down stream. It was a prize well worth having, and without waiting to put Wilmshurst and the rest of the passengers ashore the blacks paddled out and secured the derelict.

"Golly, sah!" exclaimed the Haussa sergeant. "Him canoe have one-time man alive. Now him dead as mutton."

Lying on the bottom of the canoe with his head raised above the water was a native. As the rescuing craft ran alongside the man opened his eyes.

The call of humanity having a prior claim to the importance of the pursuit Wilmshurst and the Rhodesians rendered all the aid in their power to revive the badly-wounded man. Examination showed that he had been shot at close range by a small-bore high velocity bullet. The missile had scraped his right ear, and entering at the shoulder had emerged just above the third rib. It was a nasty wound, but with ordinary attention

it ought not to prove fatal.

Finding that he was being well treated the injured man recovered sufficiently to explain what had occurred. There was no mistaking the description of his assailant—also another crime had been added to the list against Ulrich von Gobendorff, that of attempted murder.

"So the blighter is making for Twashi," remarked Wilmshurst, consulting his field service map. "That's well up in the Karewenda Hills. We may head him off even yet."

Mounting, the patrol, their energies quickened by the evidence of this latest Hunnish atrocity, set off at a gallop across the comparatively open country betwixt the Kiwa and the base of the Karewenda Hills. Woe betide von Gobendorff should he be spotted by one of the lynx-eyed Rhodesians.

CHAPTER XV

RESCUED

It was well into the dry season. As far as the eye could reach lay an expanse of sun-baked ground dotted with scrub and parched grass, terminating in the rugged outlines of the Karewenda Geberge. In the clear African atmosphere the hills, although a good forty miles distant, looked no more than ten or twelve miles away. With a powerful telescope an outpost on the high ground ought to be able to spot the khaki-clad horsemen as they spurred across the bush.

The patrol had no immediate intention of following the fugitive's spoor. Their idea was to cut off his retreat by keeping on a parallel route until they had out-distanced him, and then, by extending to the right, to achieve their object. It was a game of hide-and-seek on a large scale—a contest of wits. Around the spot where the Hun was supposed to be an extended cordon was being formed. It was up to him to break through—if he could, but once detected he stood little chance against a well-mounted patrol composed of some of the crack shots of Rhodesia.

"We've cut across his spoor," announced one of the men. "Jones has just semaphored through. We've nabbed him this time."

The order was passed from man to man for the investing horsemen to contract the enfolding circle. Each man, his rifle ready for instant use, trotted towards an imaginary centre, the

while keeping his eyes on the alert for signs of the fugitive.

Then, without warning, a column of smoke, beaten down by the strong northerly wind, rose from the scrub at a point a good two miles off. In a very short space of time the cloud increased in density of volume, moving with the rapidity of a trotting horse.

At the signal the patrol closed. The situation was serious, for not only were the chances of a successful pursuit knocked on the head, but there was the danger of the men being overtaken by the flames.

"Start another fire down wind," suggested one of the Rhodesians.

"The horses won't stand it," objected another. "They're getting jumpy already."

The man spoke truly. The animals, scenting danger, were becoming restless. The order was therefore given to mount, and the patrol galloped back in the direction of the Kiwa River, never drawing rein until they reached a ford two miles below the spot where they had crossed earlier in the day.

So swift was the advance of the bush-fire that the scrub on the furthermost bank was ablaze within twenty minutes of the time when the patrol recrossed the river, while right and left for miles the ground was covered with fiercely roaring flames. Clouds of black and brownish smoke swept across the stream, red hot embers mingling with the eddying vapour.

The patrol held their ground, keeping their horses under

control by adopting the expedient of covering the horses' heads with blankets. With the possibility of the bush on their side of the river taking fire this was the safest course to pursue short of a forty mile ride across difficult country with the devouring element hard at their heels.

Mingled with the roar of the flames came the frequent crashes of falling trees, and the hiss of blazing embers as they fell into the water. The heat was terrific, while at times the smoke was so dense and suffocating that the men had the greatest difficulty to breathe. Elephants, bush-cows, rhinoceri and swarms of smaller animals, stampeded by the flames, plunged panic-stricken into the river, taking no notice of the men as they dashed past them.

For two hours the ordeal lasted, then, having consumed everything of a combustible nature the fire burnt itself out. Almost miraculously the flames had failed to gain a hold upon the scrub on the nearmost bank. The river had formed the furthermost limit, but across the stream as far as the eye could reach there was nothing to be seen but an expanse of blackened thorn-bushes, from which a faint bluish vapour rose in the now still and sultry air.

"Nothing more doing to-day, boys," declared the leader of the patrol. "We'll bivouac close to the village and try our luck to-morrow. Ground will be cool enough by then, I reckon."

"Von Gobendorff won't stand much chance in that," remarked another, indicating the devastated ground. "We may find his remains. That'll be some satisfaction."

"Unless he started the fire," added Wilmshurst.

"But we were surrounding his hiding-place," declared the first speaker.

"We believe we were," continued the subaltern. "It's just likely that we missed his spoor, and that he was to windward of us. The fire may have started spontaneously, but it's my belief that von Gobendorff fired the grass."

At daybreak on the following morning the patrol recrossed the river. With a heavy dew still upon the ground the devastated track gave the horses no inconvenience, although the air was heavy with the pungent smell of charred wood. In extended order they followed the track which the fugitive had been reported to have taken until they arrived at the further-most limit of the fire.

Each man as he closed in the centre made the same report—nothing had been seen of the body of the much-sought-after Hun.

"We've drawn a blank, it seems," remarked Wilmshurst. "There's nothing for it but to carry on until either we overtake him or come in touch with the enemy patrols. We've a clear twenty-four hours before we rejoin our regiment."

Mile after mile the patrol rode, but not the faintest trace of von Gobendorff's line of flight was to be seen. Whether he was alive or dead was a mystery yet unsolved.

Towards midday they arrived at a kraal situated in a vast semi-circular expanse of open ground bounded on three sides

by scarps of the Karewenda Hills. The greatest caution was now necessary, the task of the patrol, failing von Gobendorff's capture, being to find out whether the lower slopes of the hill were held in force or only lightly so. If possible there was to be an avoidance of an exchange of shots with hostile outposts, but in any case the Rhodesians were to withdraw at the first sign of opposition.

The headman of the kraal, like most of his kind, was very communicative. Already the natives were appreciating the change of masters, for under German rule their lot was a hard one, forced labour and scanty or often no remuneration being the order of things.

He had seen no one answering to von Gobendorff's description, but he gave other information. The Germans were withdrawing their forces to a position on the northern slopes of the hills, and had already destroyed two guns which they were unable to remove from an abandoned redoubt about five miles to the east of the kraal. He also said that a German patrol escorting a white prisoner had passed along a native path at less than a mile of the village only an hour or so previously.

Questioned further the headman replied that the prisoner was not a "warrior"—meaning that he was not dressed in military uniform—and that for several months past he had been kept in captivity in the now abandoned fort. Several of the villagers had seen him when they went to dig earthworks for the Huns. In their hurried retirement the Germans had overlooked the fact that they had a prisoner, and the patrol had been sent back to bring him in.

"How many men?" asked Wilmshurst, one of the Rhodesians translating the question and its reply.

"Four white soldiers and ten Askaris, O chief," replied the headman.

"Good enough," exclaimed Wilmshurst. "We ought to be able to settle that crowd and release the prisoner."

The headman willingly allowed two natives to point out to the patrol the path which the Huns had taken. A reference to the map showed that, allowing the hostile patrol two hours' start, an ambush could be arranged at a spot four miles distant where the path crossed a spruit. It was unpleasantly close to one of the still occupied enemy outposts, but with quickness and decision the coup ought to be accomplished without much difficulty.

The native guides, although on foot, had no trouble to keep up with the mounted men, and when the latter arrived at the place chosen for the surprise they found that the Germans were not yet in sight.

Dismounted and accompanied by Bela Moshi Wilmshurst made his way along the side of the track until he came in touch with the hostile party. The Huns, suspecting nothing, were resting. Two Askaris had been posted as sentries, but they, too, were lax, little thinking that there was any danger of a surprise. The prisoner was seated at the base of a large tree, another Askari mounting guard over him. His back was turned in Wilmshurst's direction, but the subaltern was able to discern that the unfortunate man was practically bald-headed and wore

a thick, straggling beard.

Up to that moment Dudley had been buoyed up by the hope that the prisoner might be his brother Rupert, but at the sight of the bent and aged figure his anticipations were shattered.

"We'll have him out of their clutches, at all events," he soliloquised as he cautiously signed to Bela Moshi to withdraw.

Regaining the patrol Wilmshurst explained how matters stood, and a decision was quickly formed to attack immediately, taking advantage of the lax state of the hostile party, without waiting for them to approach the previously selected spot for the ambush.

Dismounting and leaving their trained horses under the charge of a piquet the men cautiously made their way through the scrub until they were within eighty yards of the still unsuspecting Huns.

Extending the Rhodesians took up their desired position on a semi-circular formation, enabling each one to fire should necessity arise without the risk of hitting one of his own party, at the same time making it almost a matter of impossibility for the ambushed Huns to break away without being shot down.

A whistle sounded. Up sprang the curved line of khaki-clad troopers, each man covering one of the enemy with his rifle, while a stern order to surrender immediately was given to the completely astonished Germans.

The Askaris obeyed the command without demur, but the

Germans were made of stiffer material. Throwing themselves at full length they grasped their rifles.

It was a signal for the Rhodesians to open fire—and the Huns paid the penalty. In less than a minute the action was over. The Askaris were unarmed and ordered to take themselves off, their rifles having been broken and the bolts removed.

Wilmshurst hastened to the prisoner, who at the opening fire had rolled on the ground by the side of a fallen tree. The subaltern found him lying face downwards, unable to rise, his wrists and ankles being secured by thongs of raw hide.

With a couple of strokes of his knife Dudley severed the bonds and assisted the released captive to his feet, for the man was so exhausted that he was incapable of standing unsupported.

"You're all right now," said the subaltern reassuringly. "Can you sit in a saddle for——"

"Good heavens!—Dudley!" exclaimed the gaunt and haggard prisoner.

It was Wilmshurst's turn to be dumfounded. He stepped back a pace and looked the rescued man intently in the face. Was it possible that this human wreck was his once well-set-up and powerfully-built brother?

"Rupert!" he exclaimed dubiously.

"That's me," rejoined the other. "Rather, what's left of me."

"Found an old pal?" enquired the patrol-commander, as the Rhodesians crowded round the object of their recent operations.

"My brother," replied Dudley.

"Good business," was the hearty rejoinder. "But we must be moving. We've alarmed every enemy post within five miles of us."

The patrol hurried back to the spot where they had left their horses, Bela Moshi settling the question of how the physically weakened Rupert Wilmshurst was to be moved by lifting him in his strong arms.

"Nothing ob him, sah," confided the Haussa. "Him weight of one-time porter load."

It was an exaggeration of speech on the Haussa's part, for the nominal burden of a Coast porter is roughly sixty pounds, but Rupert's weight had decreased from a normal "twelve seven" to a little over seven stones.

With the utmost dispatch the patrol remounted. Bela Moshi gave up his steed to "Massa Wimst's brudder" and rode one of the led horses. In single file the men retraced their course, maintaining a steady trot.

As they entered the kraal where the headman had given them such important information they found the natives in a state of agitated turmoil. The Huns had by some means discovered that these "black subjects of his Imperial Majesty the German Emperor" had entertained a hostile patrol, for

within twenty minutes of the departure of Wilmshurst and his companions a party of Askaris, commanded by a German officer, had visited the village. By way of punishment half a dozen huts had been burnt and an indemnity of fifty goats and a hundred litres of corn demanded, the headman and five other principal inhabitants being seized as hostages.

So great was the faith of the blacks in the "white soldiers of King George" that they rose *en masse*, liberated the hostages and drove the Askaris from their village. But the trouble was far from over, for native scouts reported a concentration of German troops on the south-eastern side of the village, while other Askari battalions were debouching from the north-east, having been hurriedly sent from one of the fortified posts on the Karewenda Hills.

"And so our line of retreat is cut," remarked Dudley. "Very well; we'll have to fight to a finish."

CHAPTER XVI

'GAINST HEAVY ODDS

The Rhodesians were men of few words. They were men of action; of the same blood as the gallant party who, under Major Wilson, fought against thousands of Matabele until the last cartridge had been fired and the last man fell with his face to the foe under the keen stabbing-spears of Lobengula's warriors.

The enemies that were threatening them were of a worse type. The Askaris, naturally ferocious, were under German command, and the German, whenever he is confident that he is on the winning side, exhibited all the brutality and cruelty of his Hunnish ancestors. Attila was a scourge; his modern descendants are simply imitators who, having the thin veneer of civilisation, combine science with bestial brutality in their methods of waging war.

Two of the troopers who were acquainted with the native dialect proceeded to place the village under a rough form of organisation. In spite of the severe restrictions laid upon the natives by their German taskmasters—amongst others they were not allowed to carry arms—the blacks managed to produce long-secreted numbers of spears, bows and arrows and a few antiquated smooth-bore muskets.

Men were sent into the bush to cut down thorns and sharpened stakes. These were set up in front of the existing stockade, the inner side of which was still further strengthened by earth thrown up from a trench three feet from its base.

"Panjies" or sharpened bamboos were set obliquely from the foot of the stockade, on the outside, to check a rush at close quarters; the stockade itself, forming no protection against modern rifle-fire, was to be used merely as an obstacle, the defenders seeking cover in the ditch and behind the embankment formed from the excavated material.

Hardly were these preparations completed when the shrill notes of a bugle rang out, and a mounted officer, followed by a native orderly bearing a white flag, appeared from the cover afforded by the bush.

Evidently the Huns had more faith in the Briton's respect for the flag of truce than they had regard for that emblem in the hands of their foes, for after a brief pause the officer, finding that his appearance was not greeted with a volley of rifle-bullets, trotted boldly towards the closed gate of the stockade.

"Halt!" ordered the Rhodesian officer, when the German drew within audible distance. "Deliver your message."

The German, standing in his stirrups, shouted a demand for the instant surrender of the garrison, promising honourable treatment if the terms were complied with, and stating that the investing troops were fully aware of the weak numbers of the British patrol.

"You might have spared yourself the trouble, Herr Offizier," replied the patrol commander. "We mean to stick it."

"Vat you mean by 'stick it'?" demanded the envoy.

"To fight it out," was the grim reply. "Come on; we're

ready."

The German made no further remark to the Rhodesian, but began an harangue in the native dialect, inciting the blacks to turn against their white allies, promising immunity and rewards.

"Stop that!" shouted the patrol commander sternly, raising his voice above the angry murmur of the villagers. "Another word and the flag of truce will not protect you."

The Hun scowled sardonically, and out of sheer bravado resumed his incitement to the natives to surrender.

Picking up a rifle the Rhodesian took careful aim at the horse's chest at point-blank range. The weapon barked. For a moment neither horse nor rider stirred, then without warning the animal's forelegs collapsed, throwing the Hun headlong in the dust.

The terrified orderly wheeled, and casting aside the white flag, rode at full gallop to the shelter of the bush, his hasty and undignified retreat being carried out without let or hindrance on the part of the defenders of the kraal.

The German officer lay where he fell, the dead steed pinning him down as it lay on its side with its hind, off-side leg rigidly extended at an oblique angle to the ground. Partly stunned by his fall the officer tried ineffectually to rise; then after a while he relaxed and lay motionless in the broiling sun with swarms of mosquitoes buzzing round the prostrate horse and rider.

Apart from the advantage of having a prisoner in their

possession the call of humanity urged the defenders to release and bring in the injured Hun. The barricaded gate was thrown open, and two troopers ran to effect the work of mercy. Even as they bent over the prostrate officer and dragged aside the animal's carcass a ragged fire burst from the bush at a distance of five hundred yards. Bullets ricochetted from the dusty ground or whizzed unpleasantly close to the men's ears; but coolly they proceeded with their task, and, unscathed, regained the shelter of the stockade, bearing their prisoner between them.

"It's von Bohme, second-in-command of the Kelji Post," declared Rupert Wilmshurst. He was too chivalrous to relate the indignities and hardships he had suffered at the hands of this Hun in particular. "They abandoned the post yesterday. Unless I'm mistaken they've a couple of machine guns with them."

"Any field guns?" asked Dudley anxiously.

"Not to my knowledge," replied his brother.

"Thank heaven for that!" rejoined the subaltern fervently. "Well, how do you feel?"

"Able to use a rifle," answered Rupert grimly.

A heavy hostile fire was being maintained from three sides, the bullets either flying high—one of the characteristic faults of African native troops—or else knocking splinters from the timbers forming the palisade. The defenders, lying close, made no attempt to reply, for the attackers were adept at taking cover and offered no target to the former's fire. Presently, as Rupert

Wilmshurst had predicted, came the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun, and a swathe of bullets traversed the open ground in front of the defences, rising until the hail of nickel simply cut a gap in the palisade like a scythe against the ripe corn.

Between the huts some villagers engaged in driving their goats to a more secure spot came under the machine-gun fire, two men being killed and four wounded, the herd suffering severely; but these were the only casualties, the defenders, both white and black, keeping admirable cover.

For a quarter of an hour the one-sided action was maintained, then still under the covering fire of the machine gun a battalion of Askaris advanced at the double in company formation *en échelon*. Simultaneously a half-battalion debouched on the opposite side of the kraal.

Until the stormers came within four hundred yards their advance was covered by the machine guns (for another had joined in the fray), and consequently the scanty defenders dare not risk exposure; but the moment the covering fire had to cease lest it should cause casualties amongst the advancing troops the Rhodesians opened rapid fire at almost point blank range.

The front attack stopped dead, the Askaris in open order falling in heaps before the accurate fire of the trained Rhodesians. Despite the efforts of their officers to advance the native troops refused to stand. Bolting they were followed by galling volleys until the resumption of the deadly machine-fire compelled the defenders to take cover.

The rear attack was a more formidable affair, in spite of the fact that the enemy force was considerably smaller than that of the frontal assault. Met by fewer rifles, for only a mere handful of white men could be told off on that side of the kraal, the Askaris contrived to reach the palisade. It was here that the native auxiliaries proved their worth, for with stones, arrows and throwing spears they put up such a formidable defence that at close quarters these primitive weapons held their own against the rifles and bayonets of the German black troops.

For several moments the contest swayed with varying success until more Rhodesians, who could now be spared from the front on which the main assault had been repulsed, doubled up and made such good use of their rifles that the enemy broke and fled, leaving behind forty or fifty of their number lying dead in front of the stockade.

"Guess they've had enough," remarked Rupert Wilmshurst, who notwithstanding his weak state had played a strong part in the defence.

"Doubt it," replied his brother. "Perhaps they won't make another frontal attack while daylight lasts, but when it's dark they'll try their luck."

The hours passed slowly. Occasional bursts of machine-gun fire punctuated the continuous rifle-firing from the men concealed in the bush. It was a prodigious waste of ammunition without any good result, for the white men were too hardened to be shaken by the moral effect of bullets whizzing overhead, while the native warriors, taking the pattern set by their allies, showed no signs of fear or panic.

"If we only had a machine-gun," thought Dudley. "By Jove, I've a mind to have a shot at bringing in one of those brutes after dark."

He broached the matter to the patrol commander, who gave permission to any of his men to volunteer for the hazardous enterprise. There was no lack of aspirants, for practically every man expressed his wish to take part in the sortie. Finally the subaltern chose three Rhodesians and his Haussa sergeant.

Taking a compass bearing of the position of one of the machine-guns, for the cloud of steam arising from its overheated water-jacket disclosed its place of concealment, Wilmshurst made a careful note of the fact for subsequent use. There was, of course, the possibility of the machine-gun being moved as soon as night fell, but that was a risk that the sallying party must be prepared to chance.

Darkness came, but the desultory hostile fire was still maintained, the bush being pin-pricked with the vivid flashes from the rifles. It was now a nerve-racking ordeal, for more than once the defenders issued from their trench and manned the outer palisade under the erroneous impression that another attack was developing.

"It's a jolly good thing for us that they haven't any bombs," remarked the patrol-commander. "I don't fancy our blacks would stand up to them. By Jove! the villagers have shown any amount of pluck."

"They know that if the kraal's taken, their lives won't be worth a brass farthing," rejoined one of the men.

"Don't know so much about that," added another. "They had a chance to let us down and save their hides, but they weren't having any."

A meteor-like trail of reddish light whizzing through the air interrupted the argument. Anxiously the defenders watched the course of the missile, guessing but not knowing exactly what it was, until with a crash it alighted upon the palm thatched roof of a hut about in the centre of the kraal.

Several men rushed to the spot, regardless of the flying bullets, with the intent on of tearing away the smouldering missile, but before they could reach the hut the dull red glow gave place to a vivid bluish flame. The mobile weapon was an incendiary rocket.

In a minute the hut was a mass of flames, the sparks communicating the fire to the flimsily-constructed buildings adjoining it.

Strenuously the defenders, both white and black, sought to confine the devouring element to certain limits by pulling down the huts in the vicinity, but other incendiary rockets followed in rapid succession, while the fire of the machine-guns redoubled in violence.

The fire-fighters made excellent targets in the fierce light, their forms being silhouetted against the blazing huts, yet their losses were comparatively few, for the machine guns were badly laid. Nevertheless, before the men could take cover two Rhodesians were badly wounded, a dozen villagers killed and thirty odd seriously injured.

In the midst of this turmoil Dudley, whose attention was centred upon the enemy, detected a large body of men deploying from the bush. Simultaneously other formidable detachments advanced upon the kraal on all sides, showing up distinctly in the terrific glare of the burning huts. To add to the horror of the scene native women and children were shrieking in terror, and the horses and cattle were neighing and bellowing as they instinctively realised the peril that threatened them from the rapidly spreading flames.

But for the presence of their black allies the troopers would have mounted and ridden straight at their assailants, running a good chance of cutting their way out by weight of numbers and the speed of their horses; but no thought of abandoning the natives to their fate entered the heads of their allies. It would be a fight to a finish.

Leaving the conflagration to take its course every available man hastened to the palisade. Rapid independent fire delayed but failed to check the charge of ferocious, wildly shouting Askaris, whose courage had been worked up by promises of rewards if successful, and dire punishment in the event of failure. Full in the blaze of light the horde of black faces gave the defenders the impression that they were confronting a swarm of demons.

On both sides rifles cracked, steel crossed steel. Again spears and arrows came into play, while some of the defenders hurled blazing faggots with great effect upon the German levies. Yells, shouts and shrieks of pain mingled with the rattle of musketry and the roar of the burning huts.

Both sides fought stubbornly and furiously, but with this difference: the defenders of the kraal were staking their existence upon the result, the attackers, although under severe penalties in the event of failure, were not confronted with the supreme decision that awaited their foes.

Taking a favourable opportunity Wilmshurst and his squad climbed over the palisade at a point where no attack was being made, and dropping to the ground doubled in the direction of the now silent machine gun. It was a daring stroke, as it temporarily weakened the little garrison, where every rifle counted; but in the event of the raid proving successful the possession of the deadly weapon would make all the difference between victory and defeat.

Overtaking and avoiding numbers of wounded Askaris and a fair sprinkling of Germans painfully making their way back to their lines the raiders covered the intervening eight hundred yards in double time. At the edge of the scrub the subaltern halted his men in order that they might recover their breath.

They had discarded their rifles. Dudley and the Rhodesians were armed with revolvers, Bela Moshi carrying an automatic pistol, formerly the possession of a now defunct Hun, and a long, heavy, keen-edged knife resembling the Mexican machete. Each man knew exactly what was required of him, and, what was more, he was capable of carrying it out.

Creeping through the bush and outwitting a couple of Askari sentries posted on the right front of the machine gun position the raiders came in sight of their coveted prize.

The gun team was standing easy chattering furiously, and paying scant attention to the progress of their comrades in the assault. Bela Moshi afterwards declared that they were squabbling over the possession of a small keg of rum, which was to them a far more important business than the attack upon the kraal. Their European non-commissioned officer was absent, otherwise the laxity of discipline would not have been taking place.

Apparently there were no infantry reserves. If there were, they were posted at a considerable distance from the machine gun position. It was, therefore, expedient to make a surprise attack with fire-arms, since the noise was immaterial as far as alarming the supports, and very efficacious in throwing the machine gunners into a state of demoralization.

Of the six Askaris forming the detachment five dropped at the first volley; the sixth, after first rolling on the ground, sprang into the bush, followed by a couple of shots the effect of which was not known.

Smartly Bela Moshi picked up the gun and tripod; a Rhodesian corporal and a trooper seized the box containing the ammunition. Then, preceded by a sergeant and followed by Wilmshurst and the remaining man, the raiders bore off their trophy.

Followed by the ineffectual fire of the two sentries the squad doubled. By the sounds in the rear it was evident that the alarm had been communicated to the reserves, as the hurried patter of bare feet and the excited orders of the German section commanders announced that the men were aware of the loss of

the machine gun. Musketry fire was opened upon the retiring raiders, but in the darkness the shots whizzed harmlessly overhead.

The haphazard fire was, however, taking toll amongst the attackers who, already casualties, were crawling or walking back from the palisade. A German officer, hit in the left arm, blundered right upon the captured weapon and its escort. For the moment he was puzzled, knowing that orders had been issued for the machine-gun party to remain in their original position. Then, distinguishing the British uniform, he drew a pistol and shouted to the party to surrender.

"Surrender yourself!" exclaimed the Rhodesian sergeant, raising his revolver.

The Hun's reply was a shot that nicked the lobe of the non-com.'s right ear. Almost immediately the latter returned the compliment, shooting the German dead on the spot.

"Sorry," muttered the Rhodesian apologetically, for he had respect for a brave foe. "You asked for it, Fritz."

The next instant Bela Moshi stumbled, the subaltern only just contriving to avoid tripping over his prostrate body. Thinking that the Haussa sergeant was hit one of the covering party began to raise the machine-gun from the ground, but the Haussa was holding it tightly in his arms.

Almost overthrowing the Rhodesian Bela Moshi regained his feet, swung the trophy over his shoulder and resumed his pace.

The returning party were only just in time. Already a formidable number of Askaris had broken through the stubbornly-defended palisade, and by sheer weight were forcing their opponents back.

Faced by hordes of German levies and with the line of burning huts preventing further retirement the defenders of the kraal were in a very tight corner indeed.

CHAPTER XVII

WATER!

In double quick time Wilmshurst's party hurried over the stockade at the same place where they had clambered out a short time previously.

Setting the tripod of the captured gun upon the raised bank at the rear of the palisade the Rhodesians fitted a belt of ammunition and promptly opened fire. Enfilading the attackers the effect of the totally unexpected hail of bullets was stupendous. The dense masses of Askaris simply melted. Only those nearest to the garrison escaped the machine-gun fire, since it was impossible to traverse further to the right without hitting friend as well as foe. Before the first belt of ammunition had been expended most of the men who had gained a footing in the village were *hors de combat*.

The assault was by no means over. Strong reserves were thrown into the breach, taking advantage of the lull in the firing. Working coolly and rapidly the machine-gunners fitted a new belt, but the difficulty now arose that the weapon could not be trained over the palisade, which, owing to its irregular form, screened the massed assailants.

Lifting the weapon and resting it upon the top of the stockade Bela Moshi shouted to the corporal to jump on his shoulders. In this difficult position the machine-gun reopened fire, but before twenty-five rounds had been fired the weapon jammed.

The gun was served by three men only—the Rhodesian sergeant and corporal and Bela Moshi. The rest of the party, including Wilmshurst, had hurried off to reinforce the sorely-tried men engaged hand to hand with the Askaris in the breach. Of the three only the corporal knew much about the internal mechanism of a German machine-gun, and in the ruddy, flickering light his task was greatly complicated.

Again the weapon was hoisted on the Haussa's broad shoulders. This time the mechanism acted without a hitch. The Askaris broke and fled, leaving a third of their number on the ground, while those who had gained a footing within the kraal lost heart and threw down their arms.

Nevertheless the danger was by no means over. At two other points the kraal had been entered, the defenders being forced back until two-thirds of the village was in the hands of the foe. The fiercely-burning huts now formed an effectual defence, the survivors of the garrison having concentrated in a space in the form of a segment of a circle, a portion of the palisade comprising the arc and the line of flaming huts the chord. For the present the barrage of fire was impassable, but what would happen when the conflagration burnt itself out remained a matter for anxious speculation.

Rhodesians and blacks worked together to dig a trench and construct a parapet. It was a strenuous task, for in order to give as much space as possible to the already congested defenders the new defence work had been pushed as far forward as the strength of the flames permitted. The while desultory long-distance firing was indulged in by the discomfited foe, the bullets pinging against the hard ground or flying with a sharp

"siss" overhead.

While this work was in progress the corporal hurried up and addressed Wilmshurst.

"Your nigger sergeant's hit, sir," he reported.

The subaltern made his way to the spot where the machine-gun had been placed out of the line of hostile fire, since a single bullet might put it out of action. Lying upon the ground with his head propped against the ammunition box was Bela Moshi.

The Haussa was barely conscious. He recognised his young officer and gave a determined but ineffective attempt to smile. Already one of the men had cut away Bela Moshi's tunic, revealing a bullet wound on the right side of the chest. Even as Dudley placed his water-bottle to the sergeant's lips the Haussa's eyes closed and he lost consciousness.

"What do you make of it?" asked Dudley, addressing the man attending to the patient.

"He's as like to snuff it, sir," he replied. "Can't tell exactly—and it's a tough job to tackle with only a field-service dressing."

"When was he hit?" continued the subaltern.

"That's a mystery, sir," was the answer. "We'd brought the gun under cover—there wasn't a chance of being hit by direct fire, you'll understand—and the black seemed to crumple up suddenly. Never said a word, but just pitched on his face. I'll

do my level best for him, sir."

Leaving his water-bottle—and water was a scarce commodity, as the supply within the kraal had been overrun by the fire—Dudley made his way to the gap in the palisade, where other units were hard at work digging a ditch across the exposed opening. Here he came face to face with his brother, whose left arm was bandaged and in a sling.

"Copped it, you see, Dudley," remarked Rupert. "If there's any trouble knocking about I'm bound to stand in. But I guess I did my whack before I was knocked out," he added grimly. "Managed to work off sixty rounds, and when we started I found myself wondering if I had the strength to pick up a rifle."

"What have you got?" asked his brother.

"Bayonet thrust," was the reply. "We were jammed up anyhow, but the fellow who gave it me won't try the trick on any one else. Have you any water?"

Dudley shook his head.

"Sorry," he replied.

"Seems a scarcity of it," continued Rupert. "All the men's water-bottles are bone-dry, and it's hot work tackling a kraal fire. The niggers, too, are clamouring for water."

"The fire's burning itself out, I fancy," remarked Dudley. "Before dawn we ought to be able to get to the well. Now I must do my whack."

Taking a spade of native workmanship from the hands of an exhausted trooper the subaltern set to work with a will, for much had to be done in a very short space of time. It was a case of excavating under extreme difficulties, for apart from the smoke and heat from the blazing huts bullets were dropping frequently and at random upon that part of the kraal still held by the hard-pressed but as yet unconquerable garrison.

Throughout the rest of the night the enemy made no attempt to renew the assault. With the dawn the worst of the task of shortening the line was accomplished, and the jaded men threw themselves down to rest, until every available position immune from rifle fire was covered with khaki and black figures sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion.

There was little rest for Dudley Wilmshurst and the patrol-commander. Having visited the sentries they examined the defences in order to discover if there were any weak points that had escaped notice during the hours of darkness.

With the exception of half a dozen huts every building comprising the kraal was reduced to a heap of charred wood and ashes, from which smoke was rising sullenly in the still air. The stockade adjoining had shared the same fate, and had it not been for the earthworks constructed during the night the rear of the defences would have been completely open to direct rifle fire. At present the heat of the smouldering embers was too great to allow any attempt to procure water from the well that was situated almost in the centre of the kraal, close to the site of the headman's hut.

The captured machine gun was still under cover, ready to be rushed to any point where an attack might develop, but the trouble that confronted the team was the fact that the water in the jacket had evaporated and no more was at present procurable. The supply of rifle ammunition, too, was running perilously short. In view of the liability of the machine gun to jam after a few rounds, Wilmshurst would have had no hesitation in using the cartridges from the belt had the gun been a Maxim. But here he was beaten, for the difference in British and German small-arms ammunition makes an interchange impossible.

The next best thing was to arrange existing stocks, so that a few troopers had plenty of .303 ammunition. The others, supplying themselves with rifles and cartridges taken from the hundreds of German dead, were then in a position to give a good account of themselves should the enemy again attack at close quarters.

Having completed his present duties Wilmshurst made his way to the hut where Bela Moshi had been taken after his wound had been dressed. The building, consisting of bamboo walls and palm-leaf thatch, had been converted into a hospital and made bullet proof by piling up earth against the sides to a height of about six feet. Above that the bamboos and the roof were riddled with bullets, making it a hazardous business for any one to stand upright.

In the limited space were two Rhodesians suffering from gunshot wounds. Almost every other man of the patrol had been hit, but one and all made light of their injuries, and after receiving attention had resumed their places in the defence.

Over thirty villagers had been badly wounded, but these were receiving the attention of their fellows, since, for some unexplained reason, they were reluctant to have their wounds dressed by their white allies.

"Going on famously, sir," announced the Rhodesian corporal, who, having played a gallant part in the defence, had returned to his errand of mercy. "I've extracted the bullet; it had lodged only a quarter of an inch under the skin and close to the right of his backbone. I don't fancy the lungs are touched. He'll pull through if any of us do."

"That's great!" exclaimed Wilmshurst, overjoyed that his devoted Haussa sergeant stood a good chance of recovery. "You ought to have been a doctor, corporal."

"I was very near it, sir," was the reply. "Had two years at Bart's and then chucked up the idea and came to Rhodesia. But this is somewhat remarkable; what do you make of it, sir?"

The corporal held up for inspection the bullet that had narrowly escaped putting an end to Bela Moshi.

"Automatic pistol bullet, by Jove!" exclaimed the subaltern, handling the piece of nickel.

"Yes, sir," continued the corporal, "and the Haussa has been muttering while he was coming to. Putting two and two together, so to speak, I fancy he stopped the bullet that grazed our sergeant's ear when we were bringing in the gun."

"Ah, yes; Bela Moshi did fall, but he was quickly on his feet again," remarked Wilmshurst.

"With a bullet that had all but just passed completely through his body," added the Rhodesian. "And after that he acted as a platform—he had a man standing on his shoulders for nearly a quarter of an hour—and only collapsed after the attack had been broken. There's vitality and pluck for you, sir!"

"And if we come out of this business alive I'll see that Bela Moshi's case is reported to the proper quarter," declared Dudley.

"The only thing against him is the want of water," said the corporal. "I'd risk getting plugged for the sake of a couple of bottles of water. How about the well, sir?"

"We're having a shot at it as soon as possible," replied the subaltern, and picking up his water-bottle, he left the hut.

The urgency of the matter decided Dudley. If humanly possible he meant to make the attempt forthwith. A glance at the still smouldering débris told him pretty plainly that it was a dangerous if not impossible undertaking, but for the sake of his Haussa sergeant the subaltern determined to procure the precious fluid.

He sought out his brother, but Rupert was sound asleep. Rupert was the only person he wanted to inform of his projected expedition, but that course was denied him.

With the bottle slung across his shoulder and a native jar—holding about a gallon—in each hand, Dudley leapt into the trench and scaled the parapet before the few men who were in the vicinity were aware of his intention. Then drawing a deep breath, like a diver about to make a plunge, he dashed into the

belt of smoke-laden air.

At every pace his boots kicked up showers of white ashes. The heat penetrated the thick soles, it singed his hair and scorched his face and hands. He felt himself wondering why he was such a fool as to try conclusions with a mass of hot embers ... why wasn't he content to wait another two hours or so, when the heat would have greatly decreased. Supposing he lost his bearings in the smoke and couldn't find the well after all?

These and a dozen other deprecatory thoughts flashed across his mind as he stumbled onwards. He had had but a brief knowledge of the plan of the kraal previous to the fire. He remembered that the well stood in the centre of a fairly open space. There, at any rate, would he find a comparatively safe oasis in the desert of hot embers.

"By Jove, that was a narrow one!" he soliloquised as a bullet —one of many shot at a venture—whizzed dangerously close to his ears and knocked up a number of small fougasses as it ricochetted in the embers.

He wanted to breathe. Already the air was on the point of being exhausted in his lungs, yet he durst not gasp for breath. Another twenty yards ... or was it forty? He was hardly sure of his whereabouts.... Mentally he enquired if he had been making a detour instead of keeping in a straight line. Maintaining direction in a haze of smoke was far more difficult, he reflected, than in a fog, especially when there was a time limit fixed for the performance.

Almost before he was aware of it Wilmshurst literally

blundered upon an open expanse where the short grass had been burnt off close to the ground. Surrounded by a barrage of bluish vapour that rose from irregular mounds of débris, the subaltern was able to breathe comparatively fresh air.

Ahead was the well, its windlass of hard teak charred but otherwise uninjured. It was a different case with the rope. The fibre had smouldered badly; it would be unwise to attempt to raise the heavy bucket by it.

Cutting adrift a length of the coir rope the subaltern bent it to the neck of one of the jars and drew up the vessel full of liquid. The water was loathsome in appearance, its surface being covered with ash and fragments of charcoal of various sizes. Prudence, as taught by long months of practical experience on the Coast, urged the young officer to resist the desire to slake his burning thirst. No water unless boiled and filtered can be drunk by Europeans without grave risks of deadly disease. But Wilmshurst now threw caution to the winds.

With avidity he filled the joined palms of his hands with the brackish and otherwise unpalatable liquid and raised it to his lips. He drank deeply, unmindful of millions of unseen germs in his almost frantic efforts to relieve the pangs of his parched throat.

Then completing his stock of hardly-gained water Wilmshurst turned to retrace his way, aware that during his stay a steady breeze had suddenly sprung up. Under its influence the dangers of the passage through the embers were greatly increased, for, fanned by the wind, numerous mounds

of débris had flared up again, while the volume of smoke had spread in density, blowing straight into his face.

For some moments Dudley stood irresolute; then seized by a sudden inspiration he ran down wind, plunging through the charred wreckage. He was going directly away from that part of the kraal still held by his comrades. His new direction led towards a part of the hostile investing lines, but he preferred to run the risk of being sniped at six hundred yards to fighting his way through the now steadily burning débris.

As he expected, his passage through this part of the devastated village was relatively easy. Being the first of the huts to take fire this section had almost burnt itself out. Occasionally he had to dodge round a heap of still burning timber. The heat was almost unbearable, while the smoke penetrating his lungs made him gasp and cough violently; so much so, that twice he had to place his precious water-jars on the ground and clutch at his throat in his distress.

At length a line of blackened, calcined posts told him that he had emerged from the kraal, and that he was on the line formerly occupied by the stockade. For another fifty or sixty yards he held on, until the smoke cleared considerably; then changing direction, he began to circumvent the abandoned line of defence until he came to the still held position.

It was not long before several bullets, whizzing perilously close, warned him that the enemy had spotted him through the eddying wreaths of vapour. Others, striking the earth with a dull thud, ricochetted within a few inches of his feet.

Bending, until his jars were almost bumping on the ground, the subaltern summoned his remaining energies in a final spurt and doubled almost recklessly towards his goal.

Through the smoke he heard the sharp challenge of one of the sentries. He tried to reply, but no sound came from his parched throat. The man raised his rifle, when his sergeant, recognising the dishevelled, swaying form of Second-Lieutenant Wilmshurst, ordered the man to recover arms. Then a white mist swam before the subaltern's eyes, and, retaining sufficient presence of mind to place the hardly-won jars of water upon the ground, he stumbled inertly into the arms of the Rhodesian sergeant.

CHAPTER XVIII

IM THE ENEMY'S POSITION

It was not long before Wilmshurst regained consciousness, to find that his precious stock of water was being boiled under the direction of the patrol-corporal. With admirable restraint the men, knowing that the subaltern had risked a horrible death for the sake of his black sergeant, had put the whole of the liquid to boil, insisting that a fair distribution would be made when the water was fit for drinking. A little over two gallons was not much among so many, but it would just assuage their thirst until the steadily-declining heat of the smouldering ruins permitted access to the well.

Producing his pump-filter, for Bela Moshi had taken particular pains to leave it in a safe place before the sortie, the subaltern strained the liquid. It was warm and insipid, yet it was now free from contamination, and Bela Moshi drank it with avidity.

A suspicion of his broad smile flitted across his face as he took the life-giving draught.

"You tink me lib for die, sah?" he enquired whimsically.

"No fear!" replied Wilmshurst, knowing that to a remarkable degree a "nigger" can control his ability to live or die. He had known of a black man who, grievously upset in a quarrel, declared that he was going to die, and promptly lying down and turning his face to the ground, the man was a corpse within

half an hour. "You get well one time quick, or me berry angry."

The subaltern's reply reminded him of a doting parent talking to a small child in baby language. Bela Moshi was a mere child in certain respects, and the mild threat had its effect. "Den me tink me lib, sah," he said.

With this assurance Wilmshurst left to snatch a few hours' much-needed rest. The bulk of the white men comprising the garrison were behind the earthworks. Occasional sharp bursts of rifle firing came from the bush, but no reply was made by the defenders of the kraal. Ammunition was too scarce and precious to be thrown away at haphazard firing upon an unseen foe. The Germans' remaining machine gun was unaccountably silent. Perhaps it had failed, after the manner of automatic weapons. On the other hand, although the captured machine-gun was liable to jam after a few rounds, owing to its having become overheated, the Huns were ignorant of the fact, and thus the practically useless weapon was a strong moral factor in favour of its captors.

Dudley slept for a solid four hours, to awake considerably refreshed to find that some one had spread a double ground-sheet above him, so as to form a tent, for the sun was now directly overhead.

"Hullo, Rupert!" he exclaimed, upon seeing his brother. "How goes it?"

"Feeling quite my old self," was the reply. "A fellow can buck up even in present circumstances after being penned up

by a mob of rascally Huns."

"What happened to you?" asked Dudley.

Rupert shrugged his bent shoulders.

"Don't ask me," he replied. "Some day I'll tell you—if we get out of this scrap."

"Did you hear what became of Robert MacGregor?" persisted Dudley.

"A thundering good old pal!" declared his brother heartily. "If he'd not been obliged to go back to Rhodesia I don't think I would have been landed in a German prison. I'd give a lot to shake old Bob by the hand again."

The subaltern regarded his brother intently. Rupert, he saw, was speaking quite naturally and without any trace of sarcasm. It was clear that he had not the slightest idea of the double, nay multi-dyed treachery of Ulrich von Gobendorff.

"Dash it all!" he soliloquised. "I can't enlighten old Rupert just now. Revelations must come later—if, as he remarked, we do come out of this business alive."

About four o'clock in the afternoon the irritating rifle fire ceased. Fifteen minutes passed without a shot winging its way from the dense scrub; and although one or two of the defenders boldly stood upon the parapet to draw the enemy, their tempting position brought no response.

"Guess we'll hike out and bring in some water," declared

one. "No time like the present, and we are as dry as a bone."

"Very good," agreed the patrol-commander. "Only look sharp about it. This lull in the firing may mean that the Boches are up to some of their knavish tricks."

Accordingly five men, each carrying four jars, set off to the well. The dangers that Wilmshurst had encountered were now over, and in a short space of time the five returned. Although they had been in full view of the enemy positions throughout, their progress had not been molested by so much as a single shot.

"The blighters are saving it up for us for to-night," declared a trooper. "Wonder if a couple of us could steal through their lines and make our way to the main column? A few squadrons would make Fritz sit up."

"No use unless we were mounted," objected another; "and a fellow couldn't hope to dash through their lines at full gallop. He'd be chock full of bullets before he got within fifty yards of them."

"I'd risk it, anyway," asserted the first speaker. "Either mounted or dismounted I reckon I'd do it as soon as it gets dark. But I'm hanged if I can understand why Fritz is so horribly quiet and well-behaved."

"That's what we'd all like to know," added the sergeant. "I'm that curious that I fancy taking a stroll that way myself."

Shortly afterwards a party of villagers were collected and set to work to bury the bodies of those who had fallen in the futile

assault. The natives, contrary to expectation, performed their tasks without let or hindrance from the enemy, although the men engaged in the work offered a tempting target.

With the fall of darkness the mental attention of the garrison became acute. At every slight or unaccountable sound the men strained eyes and ears and grasped their rifles to meet an imaginary rush. Just before midnight a shot rang out, the flash of the rifle being clearly discernible at a point immediately fronting the scene of the most formidable attack on the previous night.

"They're coming, boys!" exclaimed the patrol-commander. "Ten rounds rapid when I give the word, then independent firing. Don't waste a single shot."

Only the click of the rifle-bolts and the quick breathing of the men broke the stillness. Even the natives, awed by the impending assault, were silent as they handled their bows and long-hafted spears.

"Hear anything?" whispered the patrol-commander, edging close to Wilmshurst.

"Nothing," replied the subaltern.

"They're coming, sir," exclaimed a deep voice.

The subaltern raised his binoculars and swept the intervening space. The powerful night-glasses revealed no sign of the approaching enemy.

Again a flash, followed by the sharp report of a rifle, the

bullet knocking splinters from one of the cross-pieces of the stockade—and then utter silence.

"Dashed if I can stick this!" declared Wilmshurst. "I'll go out and see what's doing. With luck I'll be back in an hour."

"Very good," agreed the Rhodesian patrol-commander. "Give the word 'Buluwayo' for the countersign. Good luck!"

Without loss of time the subaltern started on his mission of investigation. Once clear of the kraal he realised a sense of loneliness. He would have given almost all he possessed for the companionship of his trusty Bela Moshi. Then, shaking off the instinctive depression, he devoted his thoughts to the work on hand.

He was taking a different route from the one he had followed on the occasion of the capture of the machine-gun. It was unfamiliar ground, flat and totally devoid of cover. Ahead lay a line of dark shadows that marked the commencement of the encircling bush. It was only slightly over a quarter of a mile away, but the distance seemed interminable as he slowly and cautiously held on.

Once he stood stock still, his heart beating violently. Ten yards ahead a man lay prone on the short grass. The faint starlight glinted on the barrel of a rifle, which was pointed straight at the lone subaltern.

Momentarily Wilmshurst expected to see the blinding flash of the rifle. The fellow was a long time lingering over the sights, he thought. The young officer moved a couple of paces to the right. The sinister muzzle seemed to be following him,

tantalisingly menacing.

Acting upon a sudden impulse Wilmshurst flung himself flat on the ground. After a pause he raised his head and looked towards the sniper, for such he took him to be. The man had not stirred. His rifle was cocking upwards at an acute angle to the ground, "I believe a dead Hun has given me cold feet," muttered the subaltern, and creeping stealthily he made a wide detour round the rigidly immovable figure. Then, satisfied up to a certain point, he crawled towards the motionless object.

It was an Askari. The man was one of the first to be shot during the onslaught. He had fallen face downwards, but still grasped his rifle in such a position that there was good reason for mistaking him for a sniper.

From this point Wilmshurst resumed his outward journey, proceeding on hands and knees and halting at frequent intervals to place his ear to the ground. He could detect no audible evidences of the foe. Never before, in the course of two separate campaigns against native troops officered by Germans, had he known such absolute silence amongst the black rank and file.

On and on he crawled, grimly soliloquising that much more of this mode of progression would make him imagine that he was a new type of serpent, for as he approached the outer fringe of scrub he literally moved on his stomach.

Proceeding thus he passed between two large thorn bushes. Beyond was a slight artificial depression in the ground, on the bottom of which were hundreds of metal cartridge cases.

By the peculiar pungent odour he knew that they had been fired within the last twelve hours. Some were trodden into the loose earth, which bore numerous indications of having been trampled both with boots and bare feet.

"By Jove!" he thought. "Fritz has cleared out."

Even as the idea flashed across his mind a rifle-shot rang out on his left.

Promptly Wilmshurst flattened himself to the ground, and waited breathlessly for further developments. The weird silence was maintained save for the distant croaking of bullfrogs in a marsh.

"Booby trap!" he declared, and cautiously groped around to find out if he had incautiously touched a fine wire. At a radius of his extended arm he found nothing of that nature. Perhaps, after all, a sniper was concealed in the bushes on his left, for the bullet had not been directed at him.

Bent upon investigating the mystery Wilmshurst crept round the intervening bushes. Before he had traversed thirty yards his head came in contact with the stock of a rifle. The weapon was lashed to a couple of stout bamboos. Fastened to the trigger was a short piece of wire, to which in turn was tied a length of raw hide. The subaltern gave a chuckle of satisfaction. His discovery confirmed his surmise that the investing force had raised the siege, leaving rifles so arranged that they would fire automatically after various intervals in order to convey the erroneous impression that the bush was still held in force.

The raw hide cords had been placed in position during the

heat of the day. After dark the heavy dew moistened the hide and caused it to contract until the tension upon the trigger was sufficient to release the bolt action and detonate the cartridges.

A similar ruse, embodying more ingenuity, had been practised by the British troops during the successful evacuation of the Gallipoli peninsula; but in this case the fixed rifles were fired by means of a small trickle of water dropping from an upper receptacle into a lower one. To the latter was tied a cord, the other end of which was fastened to the trigger. As soon as half a gallon of liquid entered the lower tin can, resulting in a pressure of about seven pounds on the trigger, the rifle was fired.

"And there are plenty of discarded tins lying about," thought Wilmshurst. "It seems strange that methodical Fritz should waste a good raw-hide thong when simpler and more efficacious means are available, unless—ah! I wonder if it was a lack of water that made them clear out?"

Wilmshurst was nothing if not thorough. Before returning with the joyful news to the kraal he meant to satisfy himself that the Huns had abandoned all their positions. It would be a bad business if, on the strength of the young officer's report, the patrol left the village and attempted to rejoin the main body only to find themselves suddenly attacked in the open by vastly numerically superior forces.

Checking his direction from time to time by means of his luminous compass Dudley penetrated nearly a mile into the bush. Everywhere there were evidences that the enemy had retired in the direction of the Karewenda Hills, while the not

distant sounds of wild animals showed that the bush was clear of anything of the nature of numerous parties of human beings.

Satisfied on this point the subaltern was about to retrace his way when he heard a stealthy footfall on the dew-soddened ground within a few paces of the spot where he stood.

Softly and deliberately Wilmshurst dropped to the earth, screened by the broad leaves of a cactus. He could hardly believe the evidence of his senses when, almost within arm's length, appeared the foremost of a single file of Haussas—men not only of his own battalion but of his platoon.

CHAPTER XIX

CORNERED AT LAST

Checking the natural exuberance of his wildly delighted men Wilmshurst obtained the information that the battalion, acting in conjunction with a Punjabi infantry regiment and a couple of squadrons of Light Horse, was about to deliver a surprise attack upon the enemy. Once again the wily Hun had disappointed the British forces. By means of native scouts the Germans had learnt of the approach of the relieving forces, and without waiting to exchange shots the former had effected a prompt and skilfully-conducted retirement.

Accompanied by one of the Haussas Wilmshurst hastened to inform his commanding officer of the state of affairs. On the way he found big Spofforth with the advance-guard. The latter greeted his missing chum cordially.

"You're a lucky blighter!" he exclaimed, as he critically surveyed Dudley's ragged and dishevelled appearance. "You always manage to see some fun. Here are we, after two days' hard marching, sold completely, and not a chance to fire a shot. Well, what have you been doing?"

"I'll tell you later," replied Wilmshurst. "I must report to the C.O. Briefly, we've missed von Gobendorff, but we've had one of the toughest little scraps I've ever experienced."

Colonel Quarrier was both delighted and disappointed with his junior officer's report. His satisfaction at the news of the

successful defence of the kraal was unbounded; but his brow darkened when he learnt of the escape of Ulrich von Gobendorff.

"We heard from native sources that you were in a tight corner, Mr. Wilmshurst," he remarked in conclusion. "How the news got through in so short a time is one of those unsolved mysteries appertaining to the inhabitants of Central Africa. We pushed ahead with a column hoping to catch Fritz sitting; but we were done. Well, ought you to rejoin your temporary unit? If you prefer you can remain till dawn, for I do not intend to move further till then. We don't want any exchange of shots by mistake."

"I'll return, sir," replied the subaltern. "The men will be bucked to hear the good news. I shouldn't wonder if they aren't getting a bit anxious, for I was due back an hour ago."

Without mishap the subaltern traversed the intervening stretch of scrub, crossed the open space and gained the kraal, where, as he had expected, the good news was hailed with enthusiasm. For the first time since the investment of the village the defenders were able to snatch a few hours' undisturbed sleep unaccompanied by the intermittent reports of rifles and the constant expectation of being called to arms.

Dawn was breaking when a squadron of Rhodesian Light Horse cantered up to the bullet-torn stockade, their arrival being hailed with three cheers by the undaunted patrol and a deafening clamour from the natives, who had played no inconspicuous part in the defence of the kraal. Twenty minutes later the Waffs marched in, followed by an Indian battalion,

which bivouacked in the open.

"Here we remain—so the C.O. says," declared Danvers, as the four platoon-commanders of "A" Company gathered together in a native hut temporarily converted into the mess. "It's a step nearer the Karewenda Hills, and there, according to accounts, Fritz will make a last stand."

"Unless he prefers Cape Town," added Spofforth, and the five officers laughed at the jest. "As things are going it reminds me of that kid's game 'Ring-a-ring-o'-Roses'—simply barging round and round and getting no forrarder."

"Dashed smart chap that servant of yours, Wilmshurst," remarked Laxdale, after the subaltern had related the story of Bela Moshi's devotion. "And how is he progressing?"

"Splendidly, according to Dr. Barkley's latest report," replied Dudley. "If any fellow deserves the D.C.M. it's he."

"And a little bird whispered to me," continued Laxdale, "that a certain member of the antient and accepted order of the Lone Star Crush did a jolly risky thing—fetching water under enemy fire."

Wilmshurst coloured hotly.

"Rot!" he ejaculated. "Fritz couldn't see me. They were putting up a lot of small arms ammunition, of course. No, that's nothing; almost forgot about it, in fact."

But if Wilmshurst had dismissed the incident from his mind the water had not forgotten him. The poisonous germs in the

non-filtered liquid were doing their lethal work, and that evening the subaltern was down with a severe bout of malaria.

In a covered dhoolie Wilmshurst was sent down to a hospital base-camp. With him went Rupert, who, on the setting in of the reaction following his release, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Within a couple of months Dudley was back with his battalion. Many times he bitterly reproached himself for being out of action for that period simply because he did not exercise sufficient restraint when he drank the tainted water. He realised that he alone was to blame, while most of the trouble fell upon the shoulders of his brother platoon-commanders, who already had their full share of work and responsibility.

He found the battalion at a place twenty miles further away from the Karewenda Hills than the kraal where he had played so conspicuous a part in its defence.

"You needn't have been so rattled about it, old boy," declared Spofforth. "You've missed none of the fun, for the simple reason that there hasn't been any. A fortnight ago we were within sight of Twashi. There was a Belgian column operating on the north-west side. It looked as if we were going to do something great, when we had to retire through lack of provisions. It appears that a few Huns got away and started playing the deuce with our lines of communication; put the kybosh on a couple of convoys and generally made things unpleasant."

"Rather," agreed Laxdale. "I've been hungry many a time,

but now I know what it means to have to tighten one's belt. I'll qualify for the Army Light-weight Championship yet."

"A week ago I seriously thought of going on exhibition as a living skeleton," remarked Danvers. "You've been jolly lucky, Wilmshurst; you're as fat as a prize turkey-cock. They've been stuffing you down at the base."

"At any rate I'll soon work it down to normal," rejoined Wilmshurst. "Any company news?"

"Nothing much," replied Spofforth. "Two casualties in your platoon. Bela Moshi is still away (hard lines, thought Wilmshurst), but the recommendation for the D.C.M. has gone through. The black sinner will be as proud as a dog with two tails when he gets the medal."

Within a week of Dudley's rejoining, the column was again in position to resume offensive operations. Well guarded convoys had arrived, including a much-needed ammunition column, while with the advent of the rainy season the difficulty of feeding the horses and mules was considerably reduced.

The troops advanced on a broad front, the Waffs in the centre, a Punjabi battalion on the right and a Pathan regiment on the left. Light Horse and Indian Lancers operated on both flanks, while a battery of mountain guns acted in support of the infantry.

For the last three weeks a strong Belgian column had been sitting on the banks of the Tuti, a river flowing in a south-westerly direction behind the Karewenda Hills and joining the Kiwa fifty miles S.S.W. of M'ganga. By holding the fords the

Belgians effectually cut off the retreat of the Huns from Twashi, and the latter being fully aware of that unpleasant fact were confronted with one of two alternatives—to fight it out or surrender.

Four days' steady marching brought the British column within striking distance of the outermost lines of defence. The difficult nature of the ground made it impossible to run the position. A frontal attack had to be delivered in order to pierce the line, but before this could be done the intervening ground had to be carefully reconnoitred, as many of the defences had been thrown up during the last few days, Fritz working with feverish energy when he found himself cornered.

During the course of the day four Germans approached the outlying piquets and made signs that they wished to surrender. Blindfolded they were escorted to headquarters and subjected to a rigorous examination. They admitted frankly that supplies both of food and ammunition were running short and that the Askaris were restless and showing signs of mutiny. The prisoners also gave details of the position of some of the German advance works, stating that they were but lightly held. Each man being showed a military map he indicated the position of the defence in question; and, what was more, the descriptions coincided with each other.

"It would be well, however, not to take too much for granted, sir," remarked the adjutant to Colonel Quarrier after the Germans had been removed. "This surrender business may be a put-up job to throw dust in our eyes. Their yarn has a sort of carefully-practised savour about it."

"Perhaps you are right," agreed the C.O. of the Waffs. "It would be as well to be content with a feint upon this section of the defences in case there is a labyrinth of mines. What sort of ground is this?"

He pointed with a pencil to the map spread out in front of him. The adjutant looked, frowned and tugged at his moustache.

"I really cannot say, sir," he replied at length. "If the map is correct——"

"I refer to the actual terrain," interrupted Colonel Quarrier. "Look here, Manners; if it is fairly undulating, and not too steep on the north-eastern side, it ought to be admirably suited for a *coup-de-main*. Frontal, of course, but that is inevitable."

"Just so, sir," murmured the adjutant. Colonel Quarrier deliberately folded up the map. "Very well," he said in conclusion. "Send a reliable officer out. I want an accurate report. Whom can you suggest?"

Captain Manners pondered.

"There's Mr. Spofforth, sir——"

"Too jolly lanky for the job," objected the colonel.

"Mr. Danvers——"

"Took lowest marks at map-reading," continued the critical C.O. "A smart officer in every other respect."

"Mr. Laxdale——"

"Lacks caution," declared Colonel Quarrier. "No pun intended. A good man in a rush at the head of his platoon, but for individual work—Who's next?"

"Mr. Wilmshurst, sir."

"Only just out of hospital," was the C.O.'s dictum.

"But fit and as keen as mustard, sir," persisted the adjutant for two reasons. He was getting a bit bored at having his recommendations summarily "choked off"; he also knew that Dudley Wilmshurst was, apart from being a soldier, a scout by instinct, and that he had plenty of experience of the conditions of life in the bush.

"Very well, then," declared the C.O. "Broach the subject to him privately, Manners. If he jumps at it, send him to me."

Ten minutes later Second-Lieutenant Dudley Wilmshurst "jumped."

CHAPTER XX

QUITS

The subaltern decided to go out alone. One man stood a far better chance of escaping detection than two; so greatly to the dismay of every Haussa in his platoon he faced the difficult task single handed.

Mounted on a nimble pony and carrying rifle and ammunition, revolver, binoculars, map and compass Wilmshurst was bent upon conserving his energies during the ride across the previously reconnoitred ground. On new terrain he would tether his steed and proceed on foot.

The air was still and sultry. Away to the north great black clouds piled themselves up in sombre masses, indigo-coloured with edges of watery green and flaming copper. Against the dark background the distant horizon stood out clear and distinct, owing to the exaggerated refractory conditions of the atmosphere.

"A regular deluge before long," decided Dudley.

He viewed the approaching storm with equanimity. The clearness of the atmosphere rendered his task lighter, while the change of weather would tend to keep the Askaris within their lines. Even German military despotism could not conquer the native levies' dread of a thunderstorm. Finally the darkness and rain on the bursting of the storm would enable him to get back without so much chance of being spotted, for on reconnoitring

it is on the return journey that casualties to the scouts happen most frequently.

The subaltern's sole protection from the rain was a waterproof ground sheet. Originally fawn-coloured it had been liberally camouflaged with bizarre circles, squares and triangles painted in a medley of colouring. At five hundred yards the wearer was practically invisible, the "colour-scheme" blending with the surrounding ground in a most effective manner. For the present the ground sheet, wrapped into a small compass, was strapped in front of the pommel of the saddle.

Making his way past the outlying piquets Wilmshurst rode steadily. The ground was undulating, the general tendency being a gentle rise. During the last few days the hitherto dry and parched land had been covered with rapidly growing vegetation, vivid green grasses shooting up to an average height of eighteen inches and transforming the open ground into a state strongly resembling the prairies of the New World.

Crowds of *aasvogels*, gathered around the carcass of a mule, rose on the subaltern's approach, uttering discordant cries as they flew away from their interrupted meal. It was unfortunate but unavoidable, and had Wilmshurst been within a couple of miles of a hostile post the aerial commotion would have "given him away."

Checking his map with various prominent landmarks the subaltern arrived at the limit of his ride, a clump of sub-tropical trees that crowned a horseshoe-shaped hill.

"That's all right so far," thought Dudley, comparing the

contour of the hill with the plan. "Now comes the unknown."

His military map showed an absolute desert as far as detail was concerned. Topographical knowledge was practically at zero judging by the almost blank portion of paper representing the ground between the subaltern and the twin spurs of the Karewenda Hills against which Colonel Quarrier proposed making their actual frontal attack. It was Wilmshurst's task to cross this unknown ground, finding out the best route for troops to advance in column of route without being detected, and a suitable place for extending in open order prior to the final phases of the assault.

Tethering his pony by means of a long hide-rope—for out of consideration for the animal he forbore to hobble it, since there was a possibility that he might not be able to return to it, Wilmshurst fastened the rolled ground-sheet over his shoulder after the manner of a bandolier, and holding his rifle ready for instant action began his seven-mile trek. In order to baffle the enemy scouts should they be out, Dudley wore a pair of flat-soled boots to the feet of which were fixed a dummy pair of soles and heels in the reverse way. Any one picking up the spoor would be under the erroneous belief that the wearer was walking in the opposite direction to the actual one.

"Judging by my footsteps I must be a pigeon-toed blighter," soliloquised Wilmshurst, as he noted the turned-in prints in the soft ground. "I must look out to that, or I'll give the show away."

On and on he went, making his way from one point of cover to another, yet without seeing or hearing the faintest sign of the

German patrols. It was not a reassuring business, for scouts might be in the vicinity, and a scout unseen is a far greater menace than one who incautiously betrays his presence.

Following the course of a donga he found that the narrow valley formed an admirable means for a column to advance if protected by flankers, but after tracing it for the best part of two miles Wilmshurst discovered that it terminated abruptly, merging into a vast open plain.

Cautiously the subaltern crept up the sloping face of the donga until his head was just above the edge of the level ground. By the aid of the glasses he made a prolonged and cautious survey. Eight hundred yards on his right front were swarms of vultures busily engaged in their revolting pastime; at a similar distance on the left were four *springbok* grazing unconcernedly. Both signs tended to prove that there were no human beings about, for in the case of the *springbok* their keen scent enabled them to detect the presence of the hunter to such an extent that it was a difficult matter to get within easy range of them.

Having taken a series of compass bearings and entered a few details on his map Wilmshurst started off for a kopje midway between the *aasvogels* and the *springbok*. Although he took the greatest pains to keep out of sight the nimble quadrupeds suddenly bolted, flying like the wind. A few seconds later the vultures rose from their interrupted repast, flying almost immediately over the prone form of the subaltern.

"Fishy—very," mused Wilmshurst. "What made the *aasvogels* fly this way? I'll sit tight and await developments."

For the best part of half an hour he remained perfectly quiet, not even risking to use his binoculars, lest the reflected light might attract the attention of a hostile scout. By this time the storm was drawing nearer—slowly but surely. As yet no rain had fallen. There were the indigo-coloured clouds ahead; behind the sky was one unbroken expanse of dirty yellow haze. It reminded Wilmshurst of the efforts of an amateur painter trying to "lay on" a coat of yellow paint with a tar-stained brush. Far away to the north came the reverberations of a peal of thunder. It was Nature's signal to the wary to take cover.

Finding at the end of thirty minutes that nothing happened to indicate the presence of an enemy, for the *aasvogels* had returned to their carrion feast, Wilmshurst essayed the remaining portion of his interrupted advance. The kopje, he decided, was to be the extreme limit of his reconnoitring expedition. From it he ought to be able to form a tolerably accurate idea of the nature of the terrain up to the base of the natural bastions of the Karewenda Hills.

Wilmshurst had taken only half a dozen steps when a rifle shot rang out. Practically simultaneously with the shrill whistle of the bullet something seemed to hit the subaltern on the left shoulder like a blow from a hammer.

"That's done it," was his mental exclamation. "Stopped one this time, by Jove!"

And spinning round twice he dropped to the ground.

Feeling horribly sick and faint Dudley sat up. He found that he was lying in a slight hollow, the surrounding ground being

sufficiently high to afford good cover, while ahead and on the right were bushes of long-spiked thorn.

Satisfied on the point of concealment Dudley next devoted his attention to his wound. Ripping open the sleeve of his coat he discovered that a bullet had passed completely through his left arm just below the shoulder. There was very little loss of blood, showing that the missile had missed the principal veins and arteries, but whether it had smashed a bone was still a matter of uncertainty.

Applying a first-aid dressing to the best of his ability, Wilmshurst prepared to "grin and bear it." He realised that developments would be mostly a contest of patience. The sniper was anxious to know the actual result of his shot, but too cautious to close until he felt certain that he had killed his victim. Wilmshurst, anxious to "get his own back," also knew that premature action would spell disaster. All he could do was to sit tight and hope that his enemy would leave his lair.

Slowly the minutes passed. The numbing sensation of the wound was giving place to hot, stabbing pain, while in spite of the sultriness of the air a cold sweat oozed from the young officer's forehead.

"Dash it all!" he soliloquised. "Hope I'm not going to faint or do something silly."

He bent forward until his head rested on his knees. In a few minutes the feeling of vertigo passed. A draught from his water-bottle had the effect of temporarily quenching the burning pain that gripped his throat.

"That's better," he declared, and straightway set to work to carefully blacken the foresight of his rifle, adjust the wind-gauge (for the first of a steady cross-wind had sprung up) and set the sights to six hundreds yards.

"Not so bad with the use of one arm only," he muttered complaisantly. "Hullo, here's the rain!"

With the typical fierceness of a tropical storm the rain beat down. Hailstones as big as a walnut thudded the ground, rebounding a foot or so in the air until all around was blotted out by the terrific downpour. Underneath the waterproof sheet Dudley lay, knowing that there was no chance of the sniper venturing from his lair while this battery of nature's weapons was in action. It was almost pitch-black, save for the phosphorescent-like light emanating from the falling rain. Occasional vivid flashes of lightning o'erspread the sky, followed by rumbling peals of thunder.

Taking particular pains to keep his rifle dry Wilmshurst lay close until the initial downpour had passed. Then, acting as promptly as his crippled condition would allow, he laid the muzzle of the weapon on a fork of one of the bushes. As he expected he found that he could take aim without much risk of being spotted, since the bush formed an efficient screen.

Still no sign of the sniper. Wilmshurst had no definite idea of the fellow's position. He could only surmise, basing his assumption on the report of the rifle, that he was either on the kopje ahead or else concealed behind one of the boulders on its side.

"Fritz knows how to play a waiting game too, I see," muttered Wilmshurst, as he deliberately wiped off a globule of water that had dropped upon the backsight of his rifle. "Hope he won't keep me waiting about till after midnight. I must stick it till he shows up."

The wounded subaltern bore no animosity towards the man who had shot him. In a true soldierly spirit he realised that the Hun had acted like a sportsman. It was merely a question of which scout was the sharper and Wilmshurst had been caught napping. Really he wanted to congratulate Fritz upon his excellent shot, but before qualifying his wishes on that score he must get his own back—shot for shot.

A thin haze of bluish smoke rose from a depression in the ground, and, caught by the wind, eddied into obscurity.

"Silly juggins!" exclaimed Wilmshurst. "Bad habit smoking when you're supposed to be *en perdu*. Now I know where to look for you."

The Hun was evidently arriving at a conclusion that he had "downed his man," but with the intention of waiting a little longer he was not able to resist the inclination of smoking a pipe.

Bringing the butt of his rifle to his shoulder Wilmshurst lingered over the sights—not with the idea of firing at a wreath of smoke, but to test his ability to "pull off" gently. To his surprise he found that the throbbing pain in his left shoulder had little or no effect upon his steadiness of aim. Provided Fritz showed himself the subaltern felt almost certain of

scoring an "inner" if not a "bull."

In a quarter of an hour the puffs of smoke ceased. Wilmshurst had a mental vision of the Hun knocking out the ashes on the heel of his boot and placing the pipe away in his pocket.

"Now he'll be moving," thought Dudley.

His surmise proved correct, for first the upper part of the head and then the face and shoulders of a man appeared above a ridge of ground.

Wilmshurst stirred neither hand nor foot, lest in spite of the screen afforded by the bush his movements might be noticed by the alert scout.

Followed a few long-drawn moments of suspense as the scout made a careful survey by means of his field-glasses. Apparently satisfied he replaced the binoculars and carrying his rifle at the trail prepared to descend the knoll.

Deliberately and cautiously Wilmshurst glanced along the sights of his rifle. He would wait, he decided, until Fritz was some distance from his lair. It would give him a chance to get in a couple of shots if the first perchance should miss.

With his body from the waist upwards showing clearly against the copper-hued clouds the Hun offered a splendid target.

Gently the subaltern's finger crept to the trigger. In his interest in his foe he forgot the stinging, throbbing pain. The

rifle, supported by the fork of the tree, was as steady as a rock.

Just as Wilmshurst was about to press the trigger a lurid blinding flash seemed to leap from the ground immediately on his front. With the echoes of an appalling crash that shook the solid earth ringing in his ears Dudley found himself gazing blankly ahead but seeing nothing. Dazzled by the sudden intensity of light, deafened by the concussion, he was conscious of a vile, sulphurous odour assailing his nostrils.

Gradually the mist decreased until he was able to see with comparative ease. His first thought was for his rifle; he was agreeably surprised to find that it was intact, for it seemed marvellous that the lightning had missed the steel barrel.

Then he looked in the direction of his enemy. The Hun was lying prone, his head pillowed on his arm. The other, curiously enough, was projecting obliquely in the air. All around the grass was burning, while already the luckless man's uniform was smouldering.

Abandoning all thought of concealment in his desire to aid his foe Wilmshurst sprang to his feet, and supporting his useless left arm by his right doubled towards the spot where the man had dropped.

As he drew near he saw that the German's rifle had been hurled quite ten yards. The barrel was partly wrenched from the stock, and for a distance of about a foot from the muzzle the steel had been split, revealing the glittering rifling.

Taking in these details at a glance Dudley gained the side of the prostrate man. One look was sufficient to show that the

Hun had been killed outright.

"Hard lines, Fritz," exclaimed Wilmshurst aloud. "I'm glad I didn't have to pot you."

Something prompted him to grasp the dead man by his shoulder and turn him over on his back. As he did so, Dudley gave vent to an involuntary ejaculation of surprise.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "It's von Gobendorff."

It was close on sunset when Wilmshurst, racked with pain, returned to the bivouac. Willing hands assisted him from the saddle, yet, firmly declining to submit to the attentions of the medical officer until he completed his task, the wounded subaltern made a lucid report and submitted his maps for inspection.

Next morning he was sent down to the base hospital, protesting the while that the wound was not serious enough to keep him away from his platoon just as the fun was commencing.

A fortnight later, while Wilmshurst was convalescing at Kilwa, he was surprised by a deputation of officers of his regiment—Spofforth, Danvers, Laxdale, and three or four more.

"How goes it, old man?" exclaimed Spofforth, the leader of the deputation. "You've something to show for your little dust-up."

"I have," admitted Dudley. "A clean puncture through the arm. But what are you fellows doing here? You don't mean to say that the business is over?"

"By something I mean the M.C.," continued Jock Spofforth, ignoring Wilmshurst's questions. "It's in to-day's orders, so we're here to offer congrats. The battalion's doing well—a D.S.O., two M.C.'s and five D.C.M.'s; not a bad record, eh, what?"

"Yes, the show's over as far as we are concerned," added Laxdale. "We marched in yesterday. It was a jolly satisfactory piece of work that final attack on Fritz's position."

"Sorry I hadn't a hand in it," remarked Wilmshurst.

"You did, old man," protested Spofforth. "Those maps of yours—they were simply it. We just romped home, as it were. But buck up and don't look so down in the mouth. One would fancy you didn't cotton on to the Military Cross. And here's news. We are expecting orders for Mesopotamia, so that ought to cheer you up."

And Wilmshurst, M.C., of the Frontier Force, cheered up accordingly.

[The end of Wilmshurst of the Frontier Force by Wes