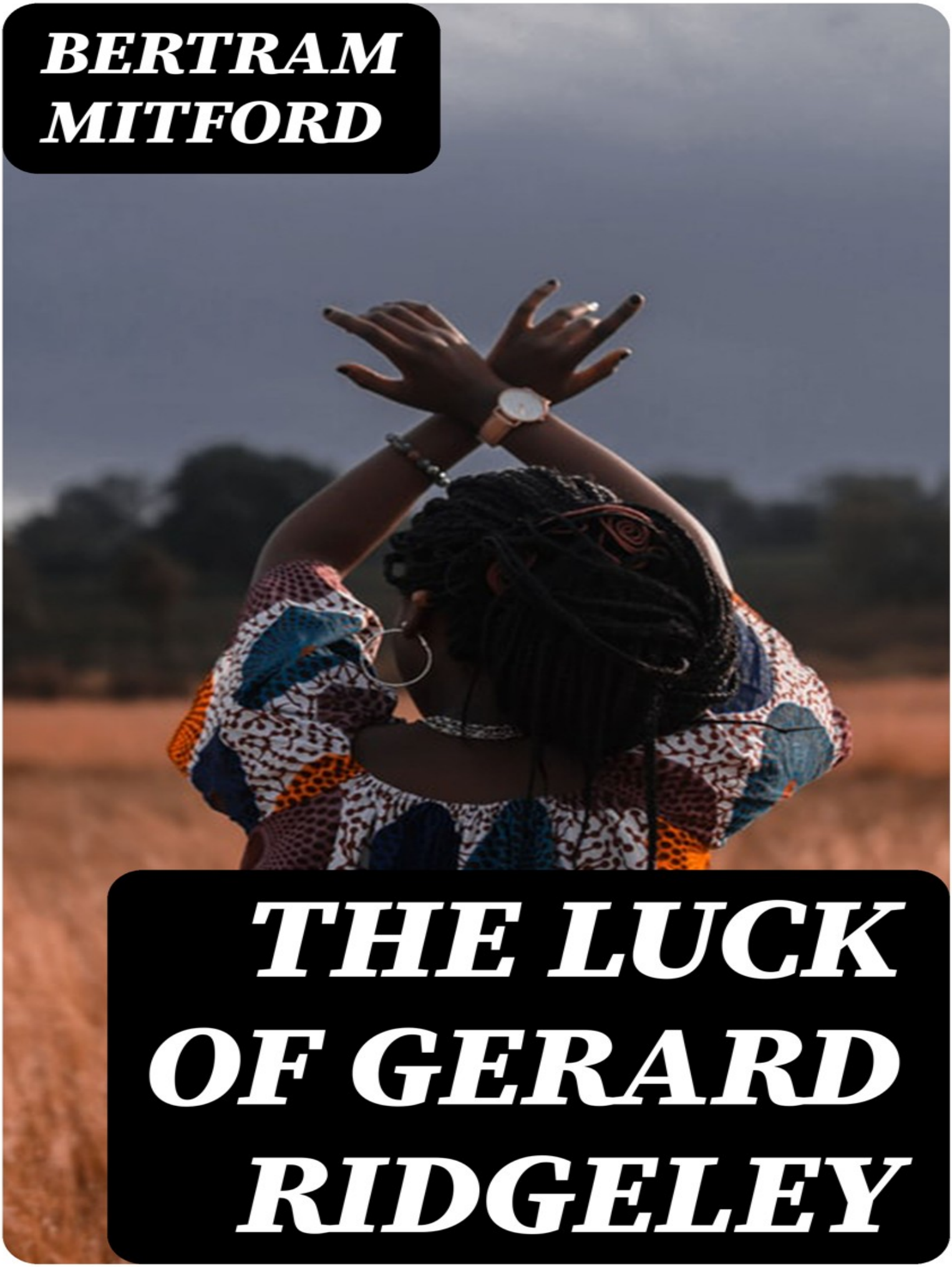
BERTRAM MITFORD



THE LUCK OF GERARD RIDGELEY

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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"The Luck of Gerard Ridgeley"

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Chapter One.

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Crossing the Durban Bar.

The steamship *Amatikulu* was drawing near the end of her voyage.

A fresh breeze was ploughing up the blue waves of the Indian Ocean, hurling off their crests in white, foamy masses, casting showers of salt spray upon the wet decks of the vessel as she plunged her nose into each heaving, tossing billow, and leaped up again with a sudden jerk which was more than lively, and calculated to produce the most distressful of throes in the systems of her passengers. But these were well salted by this time, for, as we have just stated, they were at the end of their voyage.

This being so, it was pleasant work coasting along the Natal shore; pleasant to gaze on the green slopes and luxuriant tropical foliage, with here and there a planter’s bungalow peeping out from the tall canes; trebly pleasant, indeed, after a month of sea and sky-line, unvaried by any sight or diversion save such as the ocean could afford; for the *Amatikulu* was not in the mail service, but owned by a private firm, and, being advertised to “sail direct for Natal,” had touched nowhere save at Madeira, a week out from home.

“I reckon you two youngsters will be glad to stretch your legs ashore.”

The two thus unceremoniously addressed, who had been leaning over the taffrail intently watching the coastline, turned to the speaker, one with an air of would-be offended dignity, the other with a good-humoured laugh and a word of hearty assent.

Not less dissimilar in appearance than in their manner of receiving the above greeting were these two. Both of the same age, both bound on the same errand, it was easy to see that, come good or come ill, their lines would run upon altogether different roads. One, a well-made, broad-shouldered young fellow, whose sunburnt face and muscular hands spoke of abundance of cricket and rowing, and, in short, of every healthy outdoor sport within reach. The other, of slighter build, showed, in feature and dress alike, every symptom of the budding “masher,” the would-be man of the world. Thus Gerard Ridgeley and Harry Maitland respectively, as they gazed curiously at the shores of the new country, whither both had been consigned to seek their fortunes—in a word, to shift for themselves.

They were in no way related. They had become friends on board ship—up to a certain point, that is, for they had few ideas in common. Both were of the same age, however—just under nineteen, and the *Amatikulu* carried but few passengers. But she carried them at a considerably reduced rate.

“Of course, of course,” went on he who had accosted the pair, a bluff, jolly-looking individual with a short, grizzled beard. “That’s only natural and right. Young fellows who

don’t look ahead ain’t worth their salt, in my humble opinion. And yet, if I know anything of life, I’ll bet a guinea the time’ll come when you’ll find yourselves wishing all you know you were back aboard this old barkie, with the cockroaches running over you all night, and nothing to do all day but play ‘bull,’ and look at the sea, or quarrel to kill time.”

“That’s cheerful, Mr Kingsland, at any rate,” said Gerard Ridgeley, laughing heartily at this terse summary of a sea voyage, no less than at the somewhat discouraging prediction which accompanied it. “But of course no one expects a bed of roses by way of a start in a new country. And now that it has come to the point, I feel in no hurry to leave the old barkie, cockroaches and all.”

“That’s right, my lad,” said his senior, looking at him approvingly. “We haven’t had such a bad time aboard the old ship after all. And she’s brought us over safe and sound. No—you’ll do; I can sea you’ll do, wherever you are.” And the speaker strolled away forward.

“Of all the bumptious old clodhoppers!” muttered Harry Maitland, scowling after the retreating form. “You seem to take things mighty cool, Ridgeley. Now, for my part, I can’t stand that fellow’s patronising way of talking to one. As if a chap was a schoolboy, don’t you know.”

“Bosh, Maitland!” said Gerard. “Old Kingsland’s not half a bad sort. He’s colonial, you know, and these colonial fellows are always blunt and outspoken—at least, so I’ve heard. He doesn’t mean any harm, and, if I were you, I’d knock off being so touchy about everything. I’m tolerably sure it won’t pay out here.”

“Hallo!” sneered Maitland. “You seem to be taking a leaf out of old Kingsland’s book. And it’s rather rich you setting up to lecture a fellow when you know about as much of this country as I do.”

“Well, we shall both know a little more about it directly,” was the good-humoured reply, “for in less than half an hour we shall be at anchor.”

The *Amatikulu* was now nearly abreast of the lofty brush-clad headland known as The Bluff, which extends its protecting arm between the port of Durban and the full force of the south-westerly gales. Signals were exchanged with the lighthouse, and, tumbling through the blue and lumpy seas, the steamer with slackened speed dropped cautiously into the roadstead. Then the rattling of the cable, as down went the anchor into half a score fathoms of water, and the voyage was at an end.

Not quite, however. There was still the “bar” to cross, before any could set foot on that beautiful land lying there spread out, an ocean of wooded hills, softly outlined in mellow distance against the cloudless blue. Dotted along the Berea, nestling amid tropical foliage, were scattered the villas of the well-to-do. Below lay the roofs of the busy town, a forest of masts rising above them from the land-locked harbour.

The *Amatikulu* drew too much water to attempt crossing this bar even in the smoothest of seas. From her decks the lines of roaring, boiling surf, the spume flying in misty clouds from each combing roller, were plainly visible. Visions of battening down, of a horrible half-hour spent in darkness beneath closed hatchways and crushing, thunderous seas,

arose in the minds of her dismayed passengers. And their misgivings underwent no abatement as they watched the puffing little tug-boat, tossing like a cockle-shell upon the great rollers, or burying her hull out of sight beneath the surf. Out she came, however, right bravely, and soon sheered up alongside, to take off the passengers.

Then followed much leave-taking. Gerard, who had made friends with everybody on board, from the skipper and his mates to the sour-visaged old quarter-master, felt low-spirited enough as he took his seat in the great basket, through the agency of which, by threes and fours at a time, the passengers were swung off the *Amatikulu* and deposited with a thump on the streaming decks of the little tug-boat. Nothing delighted the grinning salts so much as to note the aspect of each human basketful as it tumbled out, scared and flurried, or mirthful and cheery, according to temperament, upon the heaving deck of its new and uncommonly lively resting-place, and the gleeful alacrity with which they hoisted up the empty basket for a load of fresh victims, spoke volumes for the genuineness of the pleasure too many people take in the misfortunes of their neighbours.

“I say, my hearties, I must trouble you to get below,” said the parchment-faced skipper of the tug, hailing our two young friends. The boat was rapidly nearing the worst part, plunging and rolling in the furiously increasing seas.

“I’d rather stay on deck,” expostulated Gerard.

“Dare say you would—and get washed overboard. Then what’d be said to me I’d like to know?”

“Is it as bad as that?” said Harry Maitland, in a scared tone.

“It is so. Time we came out before this, we had a couple of black fellows washed clean overboard. There was a tow-rope out, luckily for them, or they’d never have come up again. Now then, get below, will you? it’s time to batten.”

Harry needed no second warning. Down he went into the dark, stuffy little cabin. But Gerard still hesitated.

“Let him stay, captain,” said Mr Kingsland, who had overheard the dialogue, and who, moreover, was acquainted with that functionary. “He’ll know how to take care of himself.”

“Oh, all right; he’ll have to, then. Here, mister, stand there forrard the companion, and lay hold of that ringbolt. Hang on to it, mind—hang on to it by your teeth and your eyelashes for all you know, or you’ll find yourself overboard in less than a duck’s whisper. We are going to get it lively in a minute.”

So saying, he jumped on to the bridge to take the wheel from his subordinate, while Gerard, resolving to follow that advice which related to “hanging on,” looked around upon the situation.

Up went the boat’s head suddenly with a smooth slide, up a great hill of water, from whose summit it seemed she must leap right on to that of the lofty wooded bluff rising on her port bow. Then a mighty plunge; the foam flew in a deafening hiss from her bows, breaking on and pouring knee-deep along her decks. There was a sharp warning cry. In her wake, rearing up higher and higher as it sped on, came a huge green wall—rearing up till it seemed to shut

out the very heavens. Watching it with an awestruck fascination, Gerard marked its crest curl, then, with a terrible and appalling crash, it burst full upon their decks.

For a moment he could not have told whether he was overboard, or not. The shock, the continuous pouring rush of the mighty wave—by no means over in a moment—was so stunning, so bewildering in its effect, that his senses were utterly confused. But for his firm hold of the iron ring, he would have been swept away like a feather. Hold on to it, however, he did, and with good reason. The first shock was but an earnest of what was to follow. Crash after crash, the game little craft burying herself completely beneath the mighty seas, to rise again like a duck, only to be sent staggering under once more, as a fresh roller broke in bellowing fury upon her. The rattle of her steering chains, the harsh and laboured clank of her engines, the sharp whirr of her propeller spinning clear of the water, the stifled shrieks of terrified female passengers hermetically sealed up in the cabin below—these alone were the sounds heard through the deafening roar of the surf, the swirling din of cataracts pouring along her heaving decks. A quarter of an hour of this raging, seething cauldron of waters, of buffeting, staggering, plunging, rolling half under, and there was a sudden calm. The terrible bar was passed; and none the worse for her rough usage, the staunch little craft sped blithely over the still waters of the land-locked harbour.

Then, released from their imprisonment, the passengers came swarming on deck, and a woeful sight they presented. Pallid, shaky, grime-besmeared and otherwise the worse for wear, not a man but looked as though he had been turned

prematurely out of a hospital, while many of the females were in a fainting and hysterical condition. And small wonder. Here were these unfortunate people sealed up in a square box, whose sole furniture consisted of a wooden bench let into each side, and thus, with nothing in the world to hold on to, literally shaken up as though in a cask rolling downhill, every frantic plunge of the vessel sending them tumbling over and over each other on the floor; many, too, in the wildest throes of sea-sickness; add to this the darkness, the horrible stifling atmosphere, the hoarse thunder of the great seas shivering the fabric, and the shrieks of the panic-stricken women, and it will be seen that the 'tweendecks of a tug-boat crossing the Durban bar might almost put Pandemonium itself to the blush.

"Well, Ridgeley, how did you come through it?" said Maitland, emerging very white and shaky. "I believe I'd sooner end my days in this country than go through that awful cabin experience again."

"You'd have been better above," said Gerard. "Although I haven't got a dry stitch on me, and am going to land in our new country wet to the very bones!"

But the semi-tropical sun was strong and bright, and the sea-water warm. No harm would come of ten such wettings. Then the tug was moored to the quay. There was a rush of coolie porters on board, and our two friends, surrounded by all their worldly goods, planted a first footstep on the land which was to be the scene of their start in life.

Chapter Two.

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Strangers in a Strange Land.

“Now, young fellows. Bring along your traps this way. Got anything to declare?”

The voice proceeded from a bluff hearty individual wearing a thick grizzled beard and a brass-buttoned coat. He was standing in the doorway of the Custom-house.

“Oh, hang it, I don’t know,” answered Maitland, peevishly, and looking around rather wildly. “Those niggers have cleared out every mortal thing we possess. What they’ve done with them, Heaven only knows. There doesn’t seem to be any one to look after one’s things in this beast of a place.”

The official burst into a loud laugh.

“Any one to look after your things!” he echoed. “You’ve got to do that yourself, sonny, here. But we are going to do that too.”

“I wish you had said so before,” was the ill-tempered reply. “Well, then, I have got two portmanteaus, a saddle-case and two gun-cases; a hatbox, a handbag, and two bundles of wraps.”

“All right. Step in here,” said the official, leading the way inside. The luggage was all piled on a counter, and presently Harry, to his intense disgust, found himself nearly five pounds the poorer, which amount he had contributed to the Colonial revenue as duty upon his guns, saddle, and a few other small sundries; while Gerard, whose outfit was of a more modest order, came off considerably lighter.

“Going up-country, mister?” said the official, as, the examination over, he lit his pipe and strolled into the air again.

“Yes,” answered Gerard. “We want to get to Pietermaritzburg first, though.”

“Going to join the Police, maybe?”

“Well, I have at times thought about that, if nothing better turns up. By the way, perhaps you could tell us of some place here where they would put us up, at a low figure, for the two or three days we are here. These hotels run you up such a bill.”

“So they do. I can, as it happens, send you to a place where you’ll save the ‘chips,’ at any rate. But maybe you’ll find it a bit roughish. Wayne’s, between this and the town—almost in the town. They take in boarders there, mostly working-chaps and small storemen, but all decent respectable fellows. But Wayne won’t charge you more than half what an hotel will; and if you don’t mind it being a bit rough, you can’t do better than go there. You can mention I sent you.”

“That’ll do us first rate,” said Gerard.

“All right. I’ll send a couple of boys up with your traps on a trolley. Oh, here’s one just starting up town.”

And hailing two of the native hands, he spoke to them volubly in the Zulu language, with the result that our friends’ luggage was loaded up there and then upon the vehicle.

“Good-bye, and good luck to you, if we don’t meet again. You’ll find a tramcar outside the yard gates,” said the jolly official, holding out his hand.

“Good-bye, and many thanks,” replied Gerard, giving it a hearty shake. An example which Harry Maitland followed, but minus the heartiness.

“What a fellow you are, Ridgeley!” fumed Harry, as soon as they were alone together. “What sort of a dog-hole is it that that cad is sending us to? Why, he himself said it was full of navvies and counter-jumpers. Hanged if I go there! I’m going to the Royal.”

“You must please yourself, of course, Harry,” was the perfectly good-humoured reply. “Unfortunately I can’t afford to do that. I’ve none too much cash as it is, and when that’s gone, I don’t see the slightest prospect of getting any more until I can make it myself. So, as I’ve got to rough it anyhow, I may as well begin now, and save the ‘chips’ at the same time. It won’t do you any harm either. Try it, for one night at any rate.”

The other sulkily acquiesced. The fact was he did not care to cut adrift from Gerard just then. He felt very much a fish out of water, in that strange country; were he alone, he would feel ten times more so. So comfort must give way to companionship, and he made no further objections.

A few inquiries soon brought them to the object of their search—a long low house standing back from the road. It was roofed with corrugated iron, and on each side were wings containing apparently bedrooms, opening onto the high *stoep*, for the doors stood wide open. In front of the house was a barren-looking garden, shaded by a couple of eucalyptus trees, growing one in each corner.

As they swung back the wooden gate which opened into the garden, the owner came out onto the *stoep*. He was a

tall, loosely hung man, with the sallow complexion characteristic of the dwellers in the semi-tropical coast country of Natal.

“Good day, gentlemen. Did you want to see me? I am Wayne.”

Briefly Gerard explained the object of their visit.

“I don’t quite know what to say,” said Wayne. “We don’t care as a rule to take in boarders for so short a time, besides being pretty full up just now. However, as you’re new to the country, we’ll do the best we can for you, if you can manage with a room between you, that is; it’s not a very big one at that. Here it is.”

He showed them into one of the rooms aforesaid, opening onto the *stoep*. It certainly was not palatial, being about twelve feet square. Its fittings consisted of a small iron bedstead, a ditto washstand with a zinc basin and ewer, a rather dilapidated chair, a few pegs, and a cupboard.

“But there’s only one bed, and even that is too small for two people,” cried Harry, in dismay.

The proprietor laughed.

“That’s so. One of you will have to shake down on the floor. You can toss up which it’s to be.”

“It will do us all right,” said Gerard. “Now about terms.”

The man named a figure which seemed reasonable enough.

“You see, we could put you in lower if you were going to stop. As it is it wouldn’t pay us.”

“I see. We are quite satisfied,” said Gerard.

“Right. Maybe you’d like to stroll up into the town a bit. Tea is at seven. So long!”

“Pretty offhand, that chap,” remarked Harry, as they walked along the broad dusty road towards the town.

Lines of houses, similar to their new abode, and all built apart in their own grounds, stood on each side of the road, behind hedges of tamarisk or pomegranate. Tall bananas hung out their feathery tufts, and the verandahs twined with cactus or jessamine looked cool and inviting. A stretch of flat marshy land, extending to the blue waters of the land-locked bay, was still dotted with shaggy tufts of the “forest primeval.”

But the streets showed plenty of life in all its human varieties, black or white. The red or yellow dresses of the Indian coolies made quite a glow of colour in the dusty streets. Here and there a tall head-ringed native from some inland kraal strode down the street, his head in the air, and majestic in the proud possession of a rather cloudy check shirt, his kerries on his shoulder, and a bevy of his obedient womenkind following in his wake. At these original lords of the soil Gerard could not but look with considerable interest, as he noted with approval the massive limbs and stately bearing which seemed to raise the scantily clad savage a head and shoulders above the groups of slightly built, effeminate Orientals through which he somewhat disdainfully took his way. Whites, sallow-complexioned townspeople, there were too, standing about exchanging conversation—rather listlessly, for the close of a hot summer day in Durban is apt to find men not a little languid—and here and there a bronzed planter or farmer cantering down the street, bound for his country home among the sugar-canes or the bush.

A couple of hours' stroll, and our two young friends began to feel a little of the enervating influence of the hot moist climate. Accordingly, having hailed a tramcar, they were soon set down at the door of their new lodgings.

The evening meal had already begun as they entered. Some seven or eight men, of the class described by the friendly Customs official, were seated at a long table, making great play with their knives and forks. The landlord sat at one end of the table and his wife at the other. The latter, a wooden-faced, middle-aged person, pointed to two seats which had been kept for the new boarders, and subsided again into silence. The other inmates, after a furtive stare, resumed their knife-and-fork play.

The meal, though plain, was extremely good. It consisted of tea, roast mutton, and potatoes, followed by some splendid pineapples. There was also boiled Indian corn served up in the ear, and plenty of bread and jam.

"Never ate 'green mealies' before, eh, mister?" sung out Wayne from the other end of the table, noticing that Harry half shied at the edible in question. "You just try one; you'll find them first rate."

Some one at the same time handed him the dish. The tender, smoking ears of corn looked tempting enough. Harry helped himself to one, and without much thinking what he was doing, put it endways into his mouth, and took a bite. A shout of laughter went up from the men. They had been furtively watching him, on the look-out for this. Harry reddened with anger, then tried to look dignified and indifferent.

“Never mind, mister,” cried Wayne, reassuringly. “You ain’t the first by a long chalk who has to learn how to eat green mealies. Half these chaps grinning here did just the same thing at first. Why, Robertson there, alongside you, bit the mealie cob clean in half, and then said it seemed rather dry sort of forage—eh, Robertson?”

“That’s just a fact, Wayne,” answered the man referred to, a tall, good-humoured young mechanic, seated next to Gerard, and with whom the latter had already been having some conversation.

The incident led to a good deal of chaff and bantering recrimination among the men themselves, during the progress of which Harry managed to smooth down his ruffled feelings.

Supper over, a move was made outside. Some of the men started off for the town to amuse themselves for the evening, while the others remained quietly at home, smoking their pipes in the verandah. After the noise and steamy heat of the dining-room, this was an example our two friends were not sorry to follow.

“Well, Harry, you can have the bedstead; I’ll take the floor,” said Gerard, as a couple of hours later they found themselves in possession of their room. “I feel like sleeping anywhere, I’m so tired.”

“I don’t,” grumbled the other, on whom the dearth of comfort, together with the uncongeniality of the position, was beginning to tell. “I feel more inclined to take the first ship home again than to do anything else, I can tell you.”

“Pooh, man, don’t be so easily put off! I suppose that’s what most fellows think at first, though.”

Gerard soon dropped off to sleep. Tired as he was, however, and with every disposition to adapt himself to circumstances, in less than two hours he awoke. The heat of the room, notwithstanding that the window was wide open, was suffocating, and, added to this, he awoke with the sensation of being devoured alive. A subdued groan from his companion, who was tossing restlessly upon his bed, caught his ear.

“Hallo, Harry! what’s the row?”

“Ugh! I was wondering how long you would stand it. I’m being eaten—dragged out of bed. These infernal mosquitoes!”

That was at the bottom of the mischief, then. In the silence following on his companion’s words, Gerard could hear the shrill trumpet of more than one of these nocturnal pests, winging his way aloft, to lie hidden in some secure corner of the ceiling until quiet should once more prevail, and he could again descend to browse upon his victims to his heart’s content and the repletion of his skin.

“Oh, that’s it, is it!” cried Gerard, striking a light with alacrity. “By Jove, I’m bitten all over!” he went on, examining his hands and chest, and also becoming aware of the existence of several lumps upon his head and face.

“So am I,” groaned Harry. “I haven’t been able to snatch a wink of sleep this blessed night. Just look at the brutes!”

In the candlelight, some half-dozen of the tiny venomous insects could be seen floating in the air. A good many more were on the ceiling.

“Why, hang it, I always thought they gave one mosquito curtains in countries like this!” said Gerard, “and—why,

Harry, you've got one. How is it we didn't spot the thing before?"

"Have I? Where? What—this thing?"

"Yes, of course. Let's see what it's good for."

There was a fold of gauze netting at the head of the bedstead. This, on further investigation, was found to be large enough to protect the head and shoulders of the sleeper, and Gerard duly arranged it as best he knew how for the benefit of his companion.

"There you are, old chap. Now you'll be all right—only it's rather like shutting the stable door after the horse is stolen. I'll tuck my head under the sheet, and dodge them that way."

He returned to his shakedown, and put out the light. He was just dozing off, when another exclamation on the part of his companion aroused him.

"What's the row now?" he cried.

"Row? I should think there was. Just listen to that fellow next door 'sawing planks.'"

A shrill, strident, rasping snore came through the partition, which was constructed of very thin boarding. A most exasperating snore withal, and one calculated to drive a light sleeper to the verge of frenzy.

"Well, I'm afraid we can do nothing against that," said Gerard, ruefully.

Nor could they. And what with the stifling heat, the mosquito bites, and that maddening snore, our two young friends had a very bad night of it indeed, and but little sleep fell to their lot. Harry Maitland, fagged and disgusted, was

not slow to air his grievances to the full the next morning on meeting Wayne. But that unfeeling individual only laughed.

“So!” he said. “Yes, it’s always that way. Mosquitoes are always death on a new man out from home. They don’t think much of us old stagers when they can get fresh blood. But never mind. You’ll soon get used to that.”

Which was all the sympathy they met with.

Chapter Three.

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A Friend.

“Well, youngsters! And what have you been doing with yourselves since you got ashore?”

Thus a jolly voice behind them, and a hand fell upon the shoulder of each. They were returning from a couple of hours’ row among the bushy islets of the bay, and were strolling down the main street of Durban, stopping here and there to look at a shop window crammed with quaint curios and Kafir truck, or displaying photographic views representing phases of native life and scenes up-country.

“Mr Kingsland!” cried Gerard, turning with a lively sense of satisfaction. “Why, I thought you were going straight through.”

“So I was—so I was. But I ran against some fellows directly I landed, and they wouldn’t hear of my leaving Durban yesterday—or to-day either. And now you’d better come along with me to the Royal and have some lunch.”

This invitation met with cordial acceptation. Both were beginning to feel rather out of it, knowing nobody in the place. The breezy geniality of their shipboard acquaintance did not strike Harry as officious or obtrusive now.

“We shall be delighted,” he said. “The fact is, we are none too comfortable where we are. I, for one, don’t care how soon we get out of it.”

“Eh—what! Why, where are you putting up?”

“At a precious rough-and-tumble sort of shop,” answered Harry resentfully, the recollection of the mosquitoes still fresh and green. “A fellow named Wayne, who keeps a sort of boarding-house for navvies—”

“Wayne! At Wayne’s, are you? I know Wayne well. Smartish fellow he used to be—made a little money at transport-riding (Note 1), but couldn’t stick to it—couldn’t stick to anything—not enough staying power in him,” went on Mr Kingsland, with that open-hearted garrulity on the subject of his neighbours’ affairs which characterises a certain stamp of colonial. “And you find it roughish, eh?”

“I should rather think we did,” rejoined Harry. And then he proceeded to give a feeling account of his experiences, especially with regard to the mosquitoes.

Mr Kingsland laughed heartily.

“You’ll soon get used to that,” he said. “Here we are. And now for tiffin.”

They entered the hotel just as the gong sounded. Several men lounged about the hall in cane chairs. To most of these their entertainer nodded, speaking a few words to some. Then he piloted them to a table in a cool corner.

“And now what do you propose doing?” said Mr Kingsland, when lunch was well in progress. “Stay on here and look around for a few days, or get away further up-country?”

“The last for choice,” answered Gerard. “We have had about enough of Durban already. You see, we don’t know a soul here,” he hurried to explain, lest the other should think him fastidious or fault-finding; for there is no point on which the colonial mind is so touchy as on that of the merits or demerits of its own particular town or section.

“And feel rather ‘out of it.’ Quite so,” rejoined Mr Kingsland. “But didn’t you say, Ridgeley, you had friends in Maritzburg to whom you were consigned?”

“Not that exactly. I have a distant relative up there—Anstey his name is—perhaps you know him? I believe he manages a store, or something of that kind.”

“N-no, I can’t say I do. There’s Anstey out Greytown way; but he’s a farmer.”

“Oh no, that’s not the man. This one hasn’t got an ounce of farming in him. The fact is, I don’t know him. My mother—my people, that is—thought he might be able to put me into the way of doing something, so I have got a letter to him.”

“And what is the ‘something’ you are thinking of doing, Ridgeley?” said Mr Kingsland, fixing his eyes upon Gerard’s face.

“I’m afraid I must take whatever turns up—think myself lucky to get it. But, for choice, I should like above all things to get on a farm.”

“H’m! Most young fellows who come out here are keen on that at first. They don’t all stick to it, though—not they.

They begin by fancying it’s going to be no end of a jolly life, all riding about and shooting. But it isn’t, not by any means. It’s regular downright hard work, and a rough life at that.”

“That I’m quite prepared for,” said Gerard. “I only wish I could get the chance.”

“Rather. It just is rough work,” went on Mr Kingsland, ignoring the last remark. “There’s no such thing as saying to a fellow ‘Do this,’ and he does it. You’ve got to show him the way and begin by doing it yourself. You’ve got to off with your coat and work as hard as the rest. How do you like the idea of that, in a blazing sun about as hot again as it is to-day? Eh, Maitland?”

“Oh, I suppose it’s all right,” said Harry, rather uncomfortably, for this aspect of the case had struck him as not encouraging. “But I don’t know what I shall do yet. I think I’ll look around a bit first. It’s a mistake to be in too great a hurry over matters of this kind, don’t you know. And I’ve got a lot of letters of introduction.”

Mr Kingsland looked at him curiously for a moment, as if about to make a remark, and then thought better of it. He turned to Gerard again.

“If I were you, Ridgeley—if I might offer you a bit of advice—I wouldn’t stop on here. Get on to Maritzburg as soon as you can and look up your relative. Anyway, you can’t do any good by hanging on here. Now, there’s a man I know starting from Pinetown with a load of goods. He’d give you a passage up there on his waggon for the cost of your keep, and that’s a mere trifle; and you’d have the advantage of seeing the country and at the same time getting an insight into waggon travelling. But you’ll have to

leave here by an afternoon train. He starts from Pinetown to-night."

"It's awfully kind of you, Mr Kingsland," said Gerard. "There's nothing I should like better. How shall we find him?"

"That's easily done. Pinetown isn't such a big place. Dawes, his name is—John Dawes. I'll give you a line to him. If you won't take anything more I'll go and write it now."

Just before they took leave of each other Mr Kingsland found an opportunity of speaking to Gerard apart.

"Look here, Ridgeley, I don't say I shall be able to help you in that notion of yours about getting on a farm, but I may be. You see I've got a couple of boys of my own, and between them and myself we haven't room for another hand on the place. I won't even ask you to come and see us—not just now, because the sooner you get into harness the better. But afterwards, whenever you have a week or two to spare, we shall be delighted to see you, whenever you can come, and as long as you can stay. That's a very first-rate idea of yours to get your foot in the stirrup before you think of anything else; and when you've got your foot in the stirrup, keep it there. Stick to it, my lad, stick to it, and you'll do well. One word more. This is a deuce of a country for fellows getting into a free-and-easy, let-things-slide sort of way—I say so, though I belong to it myself. Now, don't you let any such influences get hold of you. You've got to make your way—go straight through and make it, and while that's your motto you have always got one friend in this country at any rate, and his name is Bob Kingsland. Well, Maitland," as

Harry rejoined them, “ready to start on such short marching orders, eh?”

“Rather. Anything to get away from those beastly mosquitoes.”

They took leave of their kind entertainer and returned to their lodgings to pack up their traps.

“Rattling good chap, old Kingsland,” said Gerard, enthusiastically, when they were alone again.

The straight commonsense counsel, the kind and friendly interest in him and his welfare, and that on the part of a comparative stranger, on whose good offices he had not a shadow of a claim, touched him deeply. Moreover, he felt cheered, morally braced up for whatever start in life might lie before him. There and then he resolved more firmly than ever that whatever his right hand should find to do, he would do it with all his might.

Gerard Ridgeley’s story was that of many another youngster who has begun life under similar circumstances. He was the eldest son of a professional man, a struggling surgeon in a provincial town, who had recently died, leaving his widow with a family of five and the scantiest of means whereon to maintain, let alone educate, the same. His father, an easy-going thriftless man, had fixed on no definite profession for him, dimly reckoning on the chance that “something was sure to turn up” when the boy was old enough. But the only unexpected thing that did “turn up” was the doctor’s sudden death in the prime of his years, and the consequent straitened circumstances of his widow and family.

So Gerard was removed from school—indeed it was time he should be in any case, for he had turned eighteen. The good offices of an uncle were invoked on his behalf, and somewhat grudgingly given. He was offered his choice between a stool in a counting-house and a free passage to any British colony, with an outfit and a few pounds to start him fair upon landing, and being a fine, strong, manly lad, he had no hesitation in choosing the latter alternative. Then it became a question of selecting the colony, and here the choice became perplexing. But Mrs Ridgeley remembered that a distant relation of hers had emigrated to Natal some years earlier. It was true she hardly knew this relative; still "blood was thicker than water," and he might be able to give Gerard a helping hand. So it was decided to ship the boy to Natal accordingly.

It was hard to part with him. He was the eldest, and just of an age to be helpful. Still, there were four more left, and, as it happened, Mrs Ridgeley was not a woman who ever displayed over much feeling. She was a good woman and a sensible one, but not ostentatiously affectionate. So the parting between them, though hard, was not quite so hard as some others. One fact is certain. It was the best thing in the world for Gerard himself.

Harry Maitland, on the other hand, was the son of a well-to-do London clergyman. From a pecuniary point of view, therefore, his chances and prospects were immeasurably better than those of his companion. He would inherit a little money by-and-by, of which prospective advantage, however, he was wisely kept in ignorance. He, too, had been sent to the colonies at his own wish, and we think we have

shown enough of his character and disposition to suggest grave doubts in our readers' minds as to whether he would do any good when he got there. But whether he does or not will appear duly in the course of our narrative.

Note 1. The carriage of goods by ox-waggon, which before the day of railways was the sole method, is thus termed.

Chapter Four.

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John Dawes, Transport-Rider.

No time was to be lost in preparing for their start, and also in informing their landlord of their change of plans. This Gerard did with some inward trepidation, knowing that they were expected to make a longer stay. But he need have felt none. That philosophic individual manifested neither surprise nor disappointment. Whether they left or whether they stayed was a matter of supreme indifference to him. He wished them good-bye and good luck in the same happy-go-lucky way in which he had first greeted them, and filled up a fresh pipe.

Though only about a dozen miles from Durban, it took them upwards of an hour to reach Pinetown. But they did not mind this. The line ran through lovely bush country, winding round the hills often at a remarkably steep gradient; now intersecting sugar plantations, with deep-verandahed

bungalow-like houses, and coolies in bright clothing and large turbans at work among the tall canes; now plunging through a mass of tangled forest. Every now and then, too, a glimpse was afforded of the blue, land-locked bay, and the vessels rolling at their anchorage beyond the lines of surf in the roadstead outside.

“There lies the old *Amatikulu*,” said Gerard, as his ere caught the black hull and schooner rig of a steamer among these. “We shan’t see the old barkie again, and perhaps the sea either, for many a long day.”

Pinetown, as Mr Kingsland had said, was not much of a place, being a large straggling village, greatly augmented by the huts and tents of a cavalry regiment then quartered there, and they had no difficulty in finding John Dawes. Him they ran to earth in the bar-room of an hotel, where, with three or four cronies, he was drinking success to his trip in a parting and friendly glass. He was a man of medium height, straight and well proportioned. His face was tanned to the hue of copper, and he wore a short sandy beard, cut to a point. He took the letter which Gerard tendered him, glanced through the contents, then nodded.

“All right; I start in two hours’ time. How’s Kingsland?”

Gerard replied that, to the best of his belief, the latter was extremely well.

“Good chap, Kingsland!” pronounced the transport-rider, decisively. “Say, mister, what’ll you drink?”

“Well—thanks—I think I’ll take a lemonade,” answered Gerard; not that he particularly wanted it, but he did not like to seem unfriendly by refusing.

“Right. And what’s yours?”