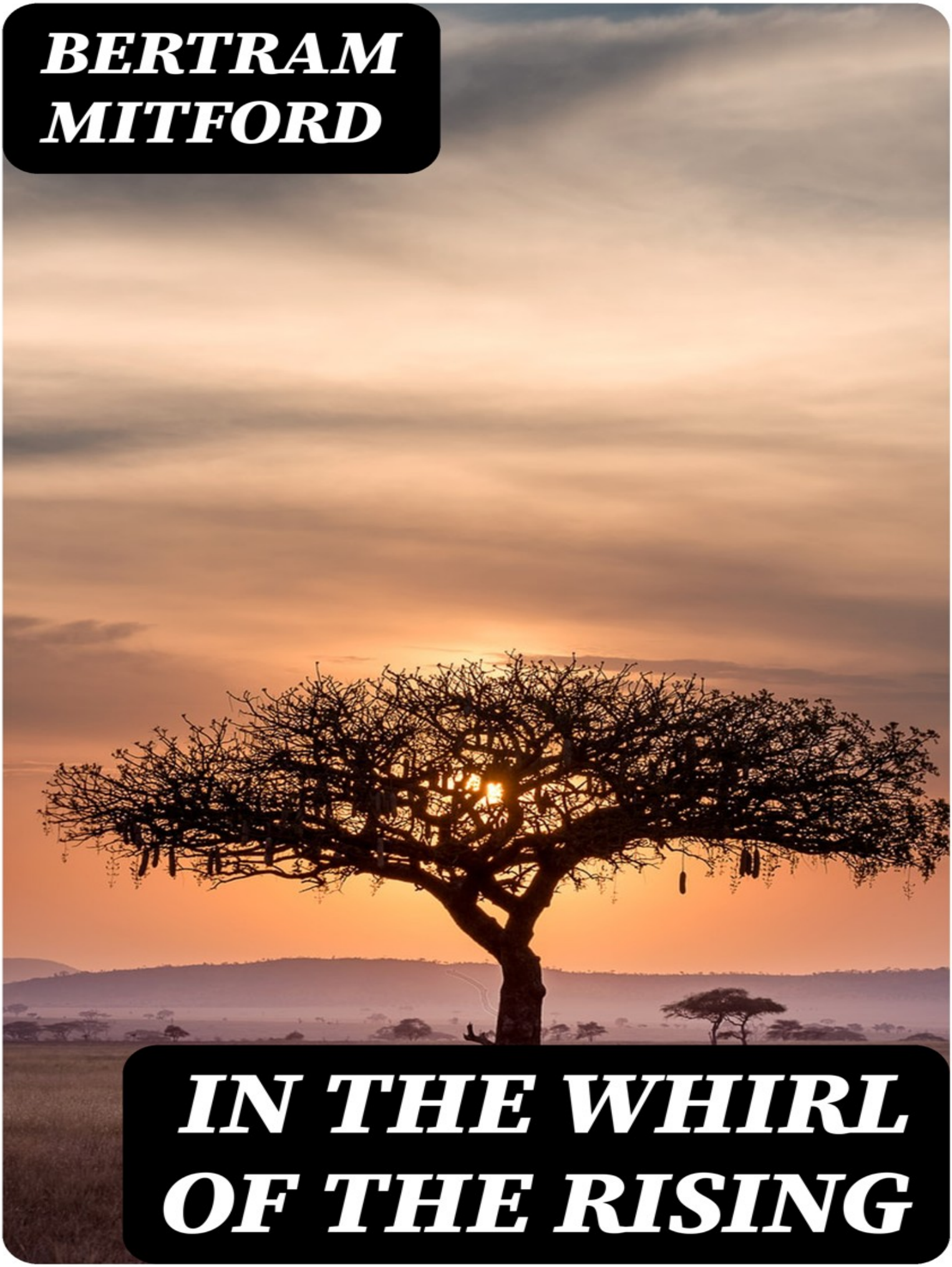
BERTRAM MITFORD



IN THE WHIRL OF THE RISING

Bertram Mitford

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Prologue.

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“You coward!”

The word cut crisply and sharp through the clear frosty air, lashing and keen as the wind that stirred the crystal-spangled pines, and the musical ring of skate-blades upon the ice-bound surface of the mere. She who uttered it stood, her flower-like face and deep blue eyes all a-quiver with contemptuous disgust. He to whom it was addressed, started, blenched ever so slightly, his countenance immediately resuming its mask of bronze impassibility. Those who heard it echoed it, secretly or in deep and angry mutter, the while proceeding with their task—to wit, the restoring of animation to a very nearly drowned human being, rescued, at infinite risk, from the treacherous spring hole which had let him through the surface of the ice.

“Say it again,” was the answer. “It is such a kind and pleasant thing to hear, coming from you. So just, too. Do say it again.”

“I will say it again,” went on the first speaker; and, exasperated by the bitter sneering tone of the other, her voice rang out high and clear, “You coward!”

Piers Lamont’s dark face took on a change, but it expressed a sneer as certain retrospective pictures rose before his mental gaze. Such indeed, in his case, drew the

sting of about the most stinging epithet that lips can frame; yet, remembering that the lips then framing it were those of the girl with whom he was passionately in love, and to whom he had recently become engaged, it seemed to hurt.

“Say something. Oh, do say something!” she went on, speaking quickly. “The boy might have been drowned, and very nearly was, while you stood, with your hands in your pockets, looking on.”

“If your people see fit to throw open the mere to the rabble, the rabble must take care of itself,” he answered. “I daresay I can risk my life, with an adequate motive. That—isn’t one.”

The words, audible to many of the bystanders, the contemptuous tone, and nod of the head in the direction of the ever-increasing group on the bank, deepened the prevailing indignation. Angry murmurs arose, and some “booing.” Perhaps the presence of the Squire’s daughter alone restrained this demonstration from taking a more active form of hostility; or it may even have been a something in the hard, bronzed face and firm build of the man who had just been publicly dubbed “coward.”

“For shame!” hotly retorted the girl. “I have no wish to talk to you any more, or ever again. Please go.”

He made no reply. Lifting his hat ceremoniously he turned away. A few yards’ glide brought him to the bank. He sat down, deliberately removed his skates, lit a cigar, then started upon his way; the no-longer restrained jeers which followed him falling upon his ears with no other effect than to cause him to congratulate himself upon having given

others the opportunity of performing the feat from which he had refrained.

The subject of all this disturbance was showing signs of restoration to life and consciousness. Seen in the midst of the gaping—and for the most part useless—crowd which hemmed him in, he was an urchin of about thirteen or fourteen, with a debased type of countenance wherein the characteristics of the worst phase of guttersnipe—low cunning, predatoriness, boundless impudence, and aggressive brutality—showed more than incipient. Such a countenance was it, indeed, as to suggest that the rescue of its owner from a watery death went far to prove the truth of a certain homely proverb relating to hanging and drowning. And now, gazing upon it, Violet Courtland was conscious of an unpleasant truth in those last words spoken by her *fiancé*. She was forced to own to herself that the saving of this life assuredly was not worth the risking of his. Yet she had implored him to do something towards the rescue, and he had done nothing. He had replied that there was nothing to be done; had stood, calmly looking on while others had risked their lives, he fearing for his. Yes, *fearing*. It looked like that.

And yet—and yet! She knew but little of his past, except what he had told her. She had taken him on trust. He had led something of an adventurous life in wild parts of Africa. Two or three times, under pressure, he had told of an adventurous incident, wherein assuredly he himself had not played a coward’s part. Yet the recollection so far from clearing him in her estimation produced a contrary effect, and her lips curled as she decided that he had merely been

bragging on these occasions; that if the events had happened at all they must have happened to somebody else. For, when all was said and done, he had shown himself a coward in her sight. Her hastily formed judgment stood—if anything—stronger than before. And—she was engaged to marry a coward!

With a sad sinking of heart she left the spot, and, avoiding all escort or companionship, took her way homeward alone. The short winter afternoon was waning, and a red afterglow was already fast fading into the grey of dusk. Against it the chimney stacks of Courtland Hall stood silhouetted blackly, while farther down, among the leafless and frost spangled tree-tops, the old church-tower stood square and massive.

It was Christmas Eve, and now the bells in the tower rang out in sudden and tuneful chime, flinging their merry peal far and wide over leafless woodland and frozen meadow. They blended, too, with the ring of belated blades on the ice-bound mere behind, and the sound of voices mellowed by distance. To this girl, now hurrying along the field path, her little skates dangling from her wrist, but for the events of the last half-hour how sweet and hallowed and homelike it would all have been; glorified, too, by the presence of *one*! Now, anger, disgust, contempt filled her mind; and her heart was aching and sore with the void of an ideal cast out.

One was there as she struck into the garden path leading up to the terrace. He was pacing up and down smoking a cigar.

“Well?” he said, turning suddenly upon her. “Well, and have you had time to reconsider your very hastily expressed

opinion?”

“It was not hastily expressed. It was deliberate,” she replied quickly. “I have no words for a coward. I said that before.”

“Yes, you said that before—for the amusement of a mob of grunting yokels, and an odd social equal or two. And now you repeat it. Very well. Think what you please. It is utterly immaterial to me now and henceforward. I will not even say good-bye.”

He walked away from her in the other direction, while she passed on. A half impulse was upon her to linger, to offer him an opportunity of explanation. Somehow there was that about his personality which seemed to belie her judgment upon him. But pride, perversity, superficiality of the deductive faculty, triumphed. She passed on without a word.

The hour was dark for Piers Lamont—dark indeed. He was a hardened man, and a strong-willed one, but now he needed all his hardness, all his strength. He had loved this girl passionately and almost at first sight, secretly and at a distance for some time before accident had brought about their engagement, now a matter of three months’ duration. And she had returned his love in full, or had seemed to, until this disastrous afternoon. And now his sense of justice was cruelly outraged, and that he felt as if he could never forgive. Moreover, his was one of those natures to which an occurrence of this kind was like chipping a piece out of a perfect and valuable vase or statue. The piece may be restored, but, however skilfully such be done, the rift remains, the object is no longer perfect. It is probable that

at that moment he felt more bitterly towards Violet than she did towards him, which is saying a great deal. He had been rudely thrown out of his fool's paradise, and with grim resolution he must accept the position and live down the loss. But the flower-like face, and the deep blue eyes which had brimmed up at him with love, and the soft, wavy brown hair which had pillowed against his breast in restful trust—could he ever tear the recollection from his mind? Pest take those jangling Christmas bells though, cleaving the night with their mockery of peace and good-will!

"Here, Violet. What the dickens is the meaning of this?" said her father, an hour or two later, as he met her going upstairs to dress for dinner. "Here's Lamont cleared at a moment's notice, without the civility even to say good-bye. Leaves this,"—holding out an open letter—"saying he's been called away on urgent business—a qualified lie you know, because no one does business on Christmas Day, and it's nearly that now—and won't be able to return; may have to go abroad immediately; and all the stock balderdash men write under the circumstances; though how they imagine anybody is going to be such an idiot as to believe them, I can't make out. Now, *you* are at the back of all this. Had a row?"

"Oh, I don't care to talk about it," she said, with a movement as though to pass on.

"But you must care to talk about it, my dear girl; at any rate for my satisfaction. You had to consult me, didn't you, in order to bring about this engagement? and now if you've

thrown the man over—and it looks deucedly as if you had—I've a right to know why. Here—come in here."

Squire Courtland was by no means of the type usually described as "one of the old school," except in so far that he was very much master in his own house. For the rest, he prided himself on being exceedingly up-to-date—and his estimate of woman was almost savage in its cynicism. Between himself and Violet there was an utter lack of sympathy; resulting, now that she was grown up, in an occasional and very unpleasant passage of arms.

"If I've thrown the man over!" quoted Violet angrily, when they were alone in her father's own private 'den,' "of course you are sure to take his part."

"I must know what 'his part' is before taking it or not. You women always expect us to hang a man first and try him afterwards; or rather to hang him on your sweet evidence alone, and not try him at all."

"Oh, father, please don't talk to me in that horrid tone," restraining with vast effort the paroxysm of sobbing which threatened, and which she knew would only irritate him. "I am not feeling so extra happy, I can tell you."

"Well, get it over then. What has Lamont done?"

"I can't marry a coward."

"Eh? A coward? Lamont? Have you taken leave of your senses, girl?"

"Well, listen. You shall hear," she said crisply. And then she gave him an account of the whole affair.

"Is that all?" he said when she had done.

"All?"

"Yes. All?"

“Yes, it is. I don’t see what more there could be. I urged him to try and save the boy, and he refused. Refused!”

“And, by the Lord, he was right!” cried the Squire. “The answer he gave you was absolutely the right one, my child. If it had been yourself you’d have seen how he’d have gone in, but for a man of Lamont’s strong common-sense to go and throw away his life for a gallows’ brat that has only been fished out of the mere to be hanged later on in due course—why, I’m glad he’s justified the good opinion I had of him.”

“Then, father, you think he was justified in refusing to save life under any circumstances?” said Violet, very white and hard. There was no fear of her breaking down now. The fact of her father siding so entirely with her cast-off lover was as a tonic. It hardened and braced her.

“Certainly I do. He gave you the right answer, and on your own showing you insulted him—taking advantage of being a woman—several times over, for the fun of a squalid rabble that I am fool enough to allow to come and disport themselves on my property; but I’ll have them all cleared off tomorrow. Coward, indeed! Lamont a coward! No—no. That won’t do. I know men too well for that.”

“Then he was a brute instead,” retorted Violet, lashing herself into additional anger, as a dismal misgiving assailed her that she might have made a hideous and lifelong error of judgment. “A coldblooded, calculating brute, and that’s just as bad.”

“I don’t fancy you’ll get many to agree with you as to the last, my dear. Any man would rather be a brute than a coward,” said the Squire sneeringly. “And every man is a

brute in the eyes of a woman if he doesn’t lie down flat and let her waltz over him, or fetch and carry, and cringe like a well-trained water-spaniel. Well, that’s neither here nor there. You’ve been engaged to a strong, level-headed, sensible man—one of the most sensible I’ve ever known—and you’ve publicly insulted him and thrown him over for no adequate cause whatever, I suppose if ever I see him again I shall have to apologise to him for the way he’s been treated.”

Violet could hardly contain herself throughout this peroration.

“Apologise to him?” she flashed. “Good Heavens! if the man went down on his knees to me, after what has happened, I wouldn’t look at him.”

“Well, you’re not likely to get the chance. Lamont is no such imbecile as to embark on any silliness of that kind. You’ve had such a chance as you’ll never get again, and you’ll live to regret it, mark me.”

The girl went from her father’s presence in a whirlwind of passion, but—it was mixed. Inwardly she raged against him for not sympathising with—not applauding her action. He had thrown another light upon the matter; hard, cynical, even brutal, but—still another light. And the sting lay in his last words. She would live to regret it, he had said. Why, she regretted it already.

Chapter One.

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The Mopani Forest.

The man could hardly drag one step behind the other. He could hardly drag by the bridle the tottering horse, of which the same held good.

His brain was giddy and his eyes wearied with the unvarying vista on every hand, the straight stems of the mopani forest, enclosing him; a still and ghastly wilderness devoid of bird or animal life. He stumbled forward, his lips blue and cracked, his tongue swollen, his throat on fire; and in his mind was blank and utter despair, for he knew that he was in the heart of a waterless tract, extending for about a hundred miles, and for over forty hours no drop of moisture of any sort had passed his lips. Forty hours of wandering in the driest, most thirst-inspiring region in the world!

He had made a bad start. There had been festivities at Fort Pagadi the night before, to celebrate the Jameson Raid and drink the health of its leaders. In these he had participated to the full—very much to the full. He had started at daybreak with a native guide, a headache, and a thirst which a brace of long and early brandies-and-sodas had failed entirely to quench. He had started, too, with another concomitant incidental to these latter—a very bad temper, to wit; wherefore, the native guide proving irritatingly dull of comprehension, he leaned from the saddle and cuffed him; which proceeding that aboriginal resented by decamping on the first opportunity.

Then he should have gone back, but he did not. He took short cuts instead. This was the more idiotic as he was rather new to the country, to this actual section of it entirely so. In short, it is hardly surprising that in the logical result he should have found himself lost—irretrievably ‘turned

round’; and now, after two days and a night of wandering to and fro, and round and round, in futile, frantic efforts to extricate himself from that fatal net, here he was hardly able to drag himself or his horse four hundred yards farther, the nearest water being anything between thirty and fifty miles away.

The scant shade of the mopani foliage afforded little protection from the sun, and even if it had, the oven-like atmosphere engendered by the burnt, cracked soil would have neutralised such. He had tried climbing trees in order to try and get some sort of bearings. As well might a swimmer in mid-ocean rise to the crest of a wave, hoping to descry a landmark. The smooth, regular expanse of bluish-grey leafage stretched away unbroken, in whatever direction he might turn his eager despairing gaze; and he had got stung by ants, and had wasted a deal of much needed vitality in the effort. That was all, and now he had not even the strength to climb half a tree if his life had depended upon it. Even an unlooked-for stumble on the part of the horse he was leading dragged him flat on his back, jerking at the same time the bridle from his hand.

“Come here, you infernal loathly brute!” he snarled, making an effort to recover the rein. But for some reason, instinct perhaps, the horse backed away, just keeping beyond reach.

He glared at the animal with hatred, not altogether unreasonable. For when he had been travelling about four hours, and was uneasily beginning to realise that he was lost, he had unslung his vulcanite water-bottle—which nobody travelling up-country should ever be without—and

had placed it on the ground while off-saddling. But something had startled the stupid brute, which in its blundering, foolish plunges had put its foot clean through that indispensable receptacle, of course shattering it like an eggshell, and spilling every drop of the contents on the thirsty, sucking soil. He had intended, when the worst came to the worst, to kill the animal, and assuage his torturing thirst with the draught of its blood; and the worst *had* come to the worst.

Some instinct must have lurked within that stupid brain, for now neither cursing nor coaxing, tried alternately, would induce the horse to come within reach. Exhausted as it was, it would still slue round, jerking the bridle away with every attempt to seize it. Once, in desperation, he seized a stirrup leather, hoping to gain the saddle that way, and recover the bridle-rein, only to result in a nasty fall against a mopani stem.

Hideous and thick were the curses which oozed from the swollen lips of the despairing man, as he saw even this last chance of life—loathsome, revolting as it was—reft from him. He had no firearms; his six-shooter he had left for repairs at Fort Pagadi, and not being able to find the smith at the early hour of his start, with characteristic impatience he had come on without it: otherwise the difficulty would have been settled then and there. But as he resumed his stumbling way, the horse, apparently appreciating human companionship in that wild solitude, continued to follow him, though persistently defying all effort to secure it.

He glanced upward. The sun was throwing long rays now along the tree-tops. Another night would soon be here,

bringing with it, however, no abatement of heat and thirst and torment—Ah! h!

The deep-drawn, raucous sigh that escaped the man can hardly be conveyed. In front the trees were thinning. There was light beyond. The road, of course! He had reached the road again, which he should never have left. There it would be hard but that some traveller or transport rider should find him, even if he had not the strength to drag himself on to the nearest human habitation.

With renewed strength, which he thought had left him for ever, he hurried forward. The line of light grew lighter. The trees ended. No road was this, but a stony dry *sluit*. It would run a torrent after a thunderstorm, but this was not the time of thunderstorms, wherefore now it was as dry as the hard rock that constituted its bed. The wretched wanderer uttered an exclamation that was half groan, half curse, but was expressive of the very acme of human despair.

He turned again to try and coax his horse within catching distance. But this time the animal threw up its head, snorted, and, with an energy he had not thought it still to possess, turned and trotted off into the depths of the mopani, its head in the air, and the bridle-rein swinging clear of the ground. With another awful curse the man fell forward on the baking earth, and lay, half in, half out of the line of trees which ended at the *sluit*.

He lay motionless. The sun was off the opening, fortunately for him, or its terrible focussed rays, falling on the back of his neck, would have ended his allotted time then and there. But—what was this? On the line of his track, moving towards him, shadows were stealing—two of them.

Shadows? They were like such, as they flitted from tree to tree—two evil-looking Makalaka—with their glistening bodies naked save for a skin *mútya* and a collar of wooden beads, with their smooth, shaven heads and broad noses and glistening eyeballs. And now each gripped more tightly an assegai and a native axe, as nearer and nearer, like gliding demons, they stole noiselessly upon the prostrate and exhausted white man.

The latter had not been so completely alone as he had supposed. Yard upon yard, mile upon mile, his footsteps had been dogged by these human—or hardly human—sleuth-hounds. Their ghoul-like exultation when they had discovered another lost white man, within what was to them as its web is to a spider, had known no bounds. *Another*! Yes. For more than one traveller had disappeared already within that trackless thirst-belt, never to be heard of again either in life or death.

To these, and such as these, this unfathomable tract of thirst-land was nothing. To the whisky-and-soda drinking Englishman, with his artificial wants, and general lack of resource and utter deficiency in the bump of locality, it was, as in the case of the one lying here, a tomb. To the lithe, serpentine savage, whose draught of water, and mess of coarse *impupu*, or mealie porridge—when he could get it—it was a joke. These two had learned this, and had turned it to account, even as they were about to turn it to account again. They had been on the spoor of the wanderer from the very first, with hardly more to eat or drink than he. But then, they had not started after spending a night toasting the Jameson Raid.

Now they looked at each other, and there was a complete inventory in each devilish glance. Summed up, it read: A suit of clothes; item a shirt, boots; item a revolver and a knife—which he was too exhausted and which they would not give him time to use; item a watch and chain—tradeable at some distant time and place; certainly some money—available immediately. The horse, too. They need not trouble about it now. They would find it easily enough afterwards, and then what a feast! Of a truth their Snake was favourable to them again!

There lay the victim—there lay the prey. Gliding like evil wood-demons from the edge of the trees they were over him now. One more glance exchanged. Each had got his rôle. The doomed man lay still, with eyes closed, and a churn of froth at the corners of the swollen lips. One slowly raised his axe to bring it down on the skull. The other gripped aloft his assegai. Both could not miss, and it was as well to provide against contingencies—when—

The fiend with the axe leapt high in the air, falling backward, then leaping half up again and performing a series of wondrous gyrations,—this simultaneously with a sharp crack from the cover opposite, on the farther side of the *sluit*,—shot fair and square and neatly through the head. The fiend with the assegai knew better than to waste time unprofitably by completing his stroke. He whirled round as on a pivot, darting within the friendly trees with the rapidity of a startled snake. But futilely. For one infinitesimal fraction of a second, Time decreed that that gliding, dark body should be in line with a certain slit-like vista in the mopani stems, and—Crack!—again. The second miscreant dropped,

like a walking-stick you let fall on the pavement, and lay face downwards, arms outspread, motionless as his intended victim.

Then there was silence again in the mopani forest, where lay three motionless human bodies; dead silence, for—hours, it seemed. No; it was only minutes.

From among the trees lining the opposite side of the dry *sluit*, out of the burnt-up grass there now arose the figure of a man—a white man. He carried a .303 magazine rifle in his left hand, and a revolver of business-like size was slung round him in a holster. He was rather tall than not, and loose hung; but from the moment he put down his foot to step forth from his cover, you could discern a sinewy elasticity of frame which it would take any two men's share of fatigue to overcome. His face was peculiar. Grey-bearded and high-nosed, it conveyed the impression of chronic whimsicality, especially just now, puckered with the chuckle which was convulsing its owner. But there was a steely clearness in the blue eyes, glancing straight from under the broad hat-brim, that you would rather not face looking at you from behind the sights of a rifle.

This curiously effective specimen of a guardian angel lounged across to the fellow-countryman whose life he had saved, and gazed down at the latter.

"Near go!" he ruminated. "Near a one as this Johnny Raw 'll ever have again. Why? 'Cause it couldn't be nearer. Good-looking feller whoever he is, but—he needn't know too much. Heave up—ho!" And laying hold of the heels of the savage he had first shot, he proceeded to haul the corpse of that assassin, to the accompaniment of very nautical-

sounding cries, to a sufficient distance as to be invisible to the intended victim when the latter should wake to consciousness.

“No; he needn’t know too much,” he repeated, returning to the sufferer. “Now then, mister, wake up and have a pull at this.”

“This” being a substantial water-bottle. Presumably there was something magnetic in its inviting gurgle—for the hitherto unconscious man opened his eyes, stared, then half leaping up made a wild snatch at the bottle.

“*Gahle—gahle*!” said the other, “and that means ‘no hurry.’ A little at a time is what’ll meet your case. Here you are;” and he filled him out a small measure. But so tremulous were the sufferer’s hands with eagerness and weakness combined that he spilled half its contents.

“That won’t do, sonny. This stuffs too valuable till we get clear of the mopani belt. Here—give it to me.” And he held it to the other’s lips.

“More—more.”

“No; that’s enough to go on with. Well—a little more, then. Now, pull yourself together and come along with me. What? Starving? Oh ay. Well, chew at this chunk o’ biscuit. It ain’t soft tack but it’s better than nothing, and I’m too old a sailor—prospector, I mean—to be navigating these seas without a shot in the locker.”

The other munched fiercely at the brown, uninviting bit of biscuit. His succourer looked approvingly on.

“That’s right,” he said. “Now we’ll serve out some more water. Then I’ll put you on my horse—he’s anchored t’other

side of the *sluit*—and we'll shape a course for my donkey-carts. They're out-spanned on the road."

"The road? Are we near the road?" stammered the other.

"Mile or so. But keep your tongue down, sonny, until we get there. You don't want to talk a lot till you've had some proper skoff."

Chapter Two.

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A Pioneer Farm.

The walls of the room were hung with dark blue "limbo," which gave an impression of refreshing coolness and restful, subdued light, in grateful contrast to the hot, white glare outside. The furniture of the room was pre-eminently of the useful order, consisting of a plain 'stinkwood' table, three or four ditto chairs much the worse for wear, a sideboard consisting of two packing-cases knocked into one, a bookshelf, and a camp bedstead whereon now reclined the, at present, sole occupant and—in general—proprietor of the place.

He had been indulging in a siesta, which had run into hours. The naturally dark face was tanned a rich brown by the up-country sun and winds, and it was just the face that the up-country life would go to strengthen—with its firm eyes and square, determined chin. As now seen it was clear that the thoughts of its owner were not of a pleasant nature. Briefly, they might be summed up somewhat in this wise—

“Is that foolery destined to haunt me for the remainder of my natural life? I shut it down and turned my back on it more than a year ago—and yet, and yet, I can’t even take an afternoon snooze without dreaming all that idiocy over again.”

The jaded lassitude usually attendant on immediately awakening out of a day sleep to those who seldom indulge in one was upon this man. Moreover, the last vision of his dreams had been one of a lovely, reproachful face—a recollection of a bitter parting and love turned to hate; a rehearsal of the whole heart-breaking experience, reproduced with that vivid reality which a dream can infuse. All of which hardly conduced to a cheerful frame of mind.

“Wonder when Peters will be back,” ran on his reflections. “He said this evening. Peters is a most effectual antidote to the blues, and— By the way, there’s nothing much for skoff. I’d better take a look round ‘the poultry yard.’”

With a yawn he rose from the couch and stood upright. His erect, firmly-knit form was well set off by the prevailing costume of the country, namely, a light shirt, breeches and gaiters, and leather belt. He flung on the usual broad-brimmed cowboy hat, and, taking a gun and a handful of cartridges, stood in the doorway for a moment, looking forth.

The glare of the hot hours was already toning off into that exquisitely soft and mellow light, where afternoon merges into the African evening. He looked forth upon an expanse of park-like country, rolling away from his very door. Three or four great granite kopjes rose farther on, and,

beyond these, a dark line, extending as far as the eye could reach, marked the margin of a vast forest tract. Taking a few steps forward he turned. Here an entirely different scene was before his gaze. Behind the rude house of plaster and thatch, from which he had just emerged, was a large circular enclosure, stockaded with mopani poles and thorny mimosa boughs, while another and smaller stockade, similarly constructed, enclosed several conical huts. He had laughed at his native servants when they had urged the necessity of building such a stockade. Lions? Hyenas? Why, no wild animal would venture inside a hut. Look at his own house. It was not stockaded. To which they had replied in true native fashion that that might be so. The *Inkosi* was a very great and powerful white man, but they were only poor helpless black men; and, moreover, that wild animals *had* been known to take people out of their huts. So he had laughed and let them have their way.

Such was Piers Lamont's pioneer farm in Matabeleland. It had been granted him by reason of his services during the war of occupation in '93, and he had sold it—for a song—when he wanted a run home. He had bought it back—very much on the same terms—a few months previously, on his return to the old up-country life.

"Ho, Zingela!" he called.

"*Nkose*!" and a young native appeared from the enclosure containing the conical huts. He was tall and slim, and straight as a dart, and had a pleasing face.

"Come with me," said Lamont, speaking the Sindabele very fairly; "I am going down to the river bank to collect a few birds for the pot. You shall carry them."

“*Nkose*!” sung out the boy with great heartiness.

The South African native is a born sportsman, and if there is a service congenial to him it is the participation, even vicariously, in any form of sport.

They strolled leisurely down among the tree-stems by the river bank. The francolin, or bush pheasant, whirred up out of the tall tambuti grass one or two at a time. Crack! crack! went the gun, and in less than half an hour Lamont’s cartridges, of which he had taken ten, were exhausted, and Zingela was carrying nine birds as they retraced their steps homeward.

“Cook them all, Zingela. The other *Inkosi* will be home to-night, and will be hungry.” Then as the boy, with a murmur of assent, withdrew, Lamont dropped into one of the cane chairs on the low stoep, beneath the projecting verandah of thatch, and lit a pipe.

The sun sank lower and lower, and the evening light became more golden and entrancing. It was an hour and a scene to promote meditation, retrospection, and he did not want retrospection. Still it was there. Like most things we don’t want, it would intrude. The influence of his recent dream was still upon him, and from it there was no getting away.

Rather more than a year ago, and Violet Courtland had indignantly, and in public, branded him as a coward. He had striven to put the incident from his mind and her and her recollection from his life—and had mostly succeeded. There were times when her recollection would be forced back upon him, though such occasions were becoming rarer and their effect fainter. Every occasion of the kind had been

succeeded by a fierce reaction of vindictive rancour against one who could so have misjudged him, and so would this. Yet it was more vivid, more saturating, than any of them.

“Not if she went on her knees to me would I ever forgive her that one thing,” he would say fiercely to himself on the occasion of such reactions, thus unconsciously paraphrasing the very words that had been said about him, more than a year ago, and upwards of seven thousand miles away. And there would occur to him the idea that life here was too easy, too stagnant. Yet he had not had things all his own way. The dread scourge which had swept steadily down from the north had not spared him; that rinderpest which had decimated his neighbours’ cattle, as well as that of the natives, had decimated—was still decimating—his own. Even this, however, could not avail to afford him the anxiety which might constitute the one nail destined to drive out the other; for its ravages, however much they might spell loss, and serious loss, could never to him spell utter ruin, as was the case with some others.

Now a sound of distant lowing, and the occasional clear shout of the driver, told that his own herd was being driven in for the night; and then the calves which had already been brought in woke up, in responsive bellow, to greet the approaching herd. Lamont rose and went round to the kraal. Here was a possible source of anxiety, and narrowly and eagerly did he scan the animals as they passed him, lest haply he might discern symptoms of the dread pestilence. But none appeared, nor did a closer investigation as he moved about within the kraal show further cause for anxiety. So preoccupied was he with this that he entirely

failed to notice the approach of a horseman in the growing dusk, until the circumstance was brought to his notice by the sharp crack of a whip and a cheery hail.

"Evenin', Lamont."

"Peters, by George! Well, I said you'd be back to-night. You're as punctual as a jolly clock, old man."

The speaker was outside the gate now, and the two men exchanged a cordial hand-grip.

"Jolly glad you are back too," he went on. "I've got on a fit of holy blues to-night."

"Oh well, then, it's a good job I've brought along a chum. He'll help liven you."

"A chum? Where is he?"

"With the carts. They're about at the three-mile *draai* now. His horse knocked out. This was the way of it," went on Peters, who, having off-saddled his own mount and handed it over to a boy, led the way to the house. "You know Fuliya's bend on the Pagadi road. No, you don't? Well, no matter. Here's luck, old man."

Down went two long tumblers of whisky-and-selzogene.

"We'll have another when the other chap turns up," said Peters, with a jolly laugh. "Well, as I was saying, just before I got to that bend I saw two ugly Makalakas cross the road."

"Nothing wonderful in that. Most likely they only wanted to get to the other side," said Lamont slily.

"Eh? Oh, I see. Well they did, of course. They dived into the mopani. But, you know, they gave me the idea of being up to some devilment. They didn't see me neither, and they had axes and assegais, but of course it was none of my business if they were going to stick or hack some other

nigger, so I just rode on. A mile or so farther, just the other side of a dry *sluit*, I saw a brand-new bush-buck spoor leading into the mopani. I could do with some fresh meat just then—dead sick of 'bully'—so started to see if I could get near enough to him with the .303. Well I didn't. I saw something else that drove the other clean out of my head. On the opposite side of the *sluit* from me a man staggered out from the trees—a white man—and fell. 'That's what those two devils were up to, was it,' I thought. They'd assegaied him from behind, and would be here in a minute to collect the plunder. You know, Lamont, more than one white man has disappeared in that mopani belt, but it's always been put down to thirst."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, I just dropped down in the tambuti grass, and wormed forward to where I could see over a bit o' rock. Then I drew a careful bead on the exact spot where the nigger would stand to finish off the chap, and—by the Lord!—there the nigger was, with an axe all ready in his fist. In about a second he had skipped his own length in the air, and was prancing about on the ground. He'd got it through the head, you see."

"Good! Did the other show up?"

"Didn't he? They showed up together. He cleared. But he was too late. I got him too."

"Good old right and left! Well done, Peters! And the white man—who was he, and was he badly damaged?"

"He wasn't damaged at all. But he'd have been dead of thirst before night, even if the niggers had never sighted him. He's a Johnny Raw, and he'd been drawing sort of

figures of eight all about that mopani patch for the last forty-eight hours. I didn’t tell him there’d been any shootin’, or any niggers at all, and ain’t going to. That sounds like the carts,” as the noise of wheels and whip cracking drew nearer and nearer. “Yes; it is.”

As the carts drew up, Lamont went back into the room for a moment to get something he had left. When he turned, a tall figure stood in the doorway framed against the darkness beyond.

“Lamont—isn’t it?”

This was a fairly familiar method of address from a perfect stranger, even in a land of generally prevailing free-and-easiness, and Lamont stiffened.

“Let me see, I know the voice,” he said, staring at the new arrival. “But—”

The other laughed.

“Thought I’d give you a little surprise,” he said. “I’m Ancram. We were staying at Courtland together, don’t you remember?”

“Oh yes—perfectly. Come in. I didn’t recognise you at first because—er—”

“I haven’t had a shave for a week,” supplemented the other, with an easy laugh. “Well, we can put that right now.”

“It did make a difference certainly. Well, and how are you, Ancram?”

“Hallo!” sung out Peters, appearing at the door. “Brought off your surprise yet, Ancram? He said I wasn’t to give away his name, Lamont, because he wanted to spring a surprise on you. Ha-ha!”

Chapter Three.

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Taking in the Stranger.

Decidedly Lamont had had a surprise sprung upon him. Whether it was an agreeable one or not is another matter.

His greeting of the new arrival was polite rather than cordial; even pleasant, but not spontaneous. There was a vast difference in his handshake here to that wherewith he had welcomed Peters, for instance; nor did he use the formula, “Glad to see you.” Ancram noticed this, and so did Peters.

Lamont was nothing if not downright, and would never say a thing he did not mean. Peters knew this, wherefore he began to feel mightily uncomfortable, and wished he hadn’t brought the stranger along. But then Ancram had asked him point-blank if he could tell him where to find Lamont, who was a friend of his, and whom he had heard was settled somewhere in these parts; and he had received the question with a great roar of laughter, replying that no man in all Rhodesia was more fully qualified to give him that very information. But if this outsider’s presence was going to prove a thorn in the side of his friend,—rather than do anything to annoy whom he would have cut off his right hand,—why, the sooner they scooted him off the better, decided Peters. Aloud he said—

“Here’s luck, Ancram. What would you have given for this jolly long drink when you were strolling about in the *doorstland*, hey?”