CHAPTER I. ALLAN LEARNS FRENCH

Although in my old age I, Allan Quatermain, have taken to writing--after a fashion--never yet have I set down a single word of the tale of my first love and of the adventures that are grouped around her beautiful and tragic history. I suppose this is because it has always seemed to me too holy and far-off a matter--as holy and far-off as is that heaven which holds the splendid spirit of Marie Marais. But now, in my age, that which was far-off draws near again; and at night, in the depths between the stars, sometimes I seem to see the opening doors through which I must pass, and leaning earthwards across their threshold, with outstretched arms and dark and dewy eyes, a shadow long forgotten by all save me--the shadow of Marie Marais.

An old man's dream, doubtless, no more. Still, I will try to set down that history which ended in so great a sacrifice, and one so worthy of record, though I hope that no human eye will read it until I also am forgotten, or, at any rate, have grown dim in the gathering mists of oblivion. And I am glad that I have waited to make this attempt, for it seems to me that only of late have I come to understand and appreciate at its true value the character of her of whom I tell, and the passionate affection which was her bounteous offering to one so utterly unworthy as myself. What have I done, I wonder, that to me should have been decreed the love of two such women as Marie and that of Stella, also now long dead, to whom alone in the world I told all her tale?

I remember I feared lest she should take it ill, but this was not so. Indeed, during our brief married days, she thought and talked much of Marie, and some of her last words to me were that she was going to seek her, and that they would wait for me together in the land of love, pure and immortal.

So with Stella's death all that side of life came to an end for me, since during the long years which stretch between then and now I have never said another tender word to woman. I admit, however, that once, long afterwards, a certain little witch of a Zulu did say tender words to me, and for an hour or so almost turned my head, an art in which she had great skill. This I say because I wish to be quite honest, although it--I mean my head, for there was no heart involved in the matter--came straight again at once. Her name was Mameena, and I have set down her remarkable story elsewhere.

To return. As I have already written in another book, I passed my youth with my old father, a Church of England clergyman, in what is now the Cradock district of the Cape Colony.

Then it was a wild place enough, with a very small white population. Among our few neighbours was a Boer farmer of the name of Henri Marais, who lived about fifteen miles from our station, on a fine farm called Maraisfontein. I say he was a Boer, but, as may be guessed from both his Christian and surname, his origin was Huguenot, his forefather, who was also named Henri Marais--though I think the Marais was spelt

rather differently then--having been one of the first of that faith who emigrated to South Africa to escape the cruelties of Louis XIV. at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

Unlike most Boers of similar descent, these particular Marais--for, of course, there are many other families so called--never forgot their origin. Indeed, from father to son, they kept up some knowledge of the French tongue, and among themselves often spoke it after a fashion. At any rate, it was the habit of Henri Marais, who was excessively religious, to read his chapter of the Bible (which it is, or was, the custom of the Boers to spell out every morning, should their learning allow them to do so), not in the "taal" or patois Dutch, but in good old French. I have the very book from which he used to read now, for, curiously enough, in after years, when all these events had long been gathered to the past, I chanced to buy it among a parcel of other works at the weekly auction of odds and ends on the market square of Maritzburg. I remember that when I opened the great tome, bound over the original leather boards in buckskin, and discovered to whom it had belonged, I burst into tears. There was no doubt about it, for, as was customary in old days, this Bible had sundry fly-leaves sewn up with it for the purpose of the recording of events important to its owner.

The first entries were made by the original Henri Marais, and record how he and his compatriots were driven from France, his father having lost his life in the religious persecutions. After this comes a long list of births, marriages and deaths continued from generation to generation,

and amongst them a few notes telling of such matters as the change of the dwelling-places of the family, always in French. Towards the end of the list appears the entry of the birth of the Henri Marais whom I knew, alas! too well, and of his only sister. Then is written his marriage to Marie Labuschagne, also, be it noted, of the Huguenot stock. In the next year follows the birth of Marie Marais, my Marie, and, after a long interval, for no other children were born, the death of her mother. Immediately below appears the following curious passage:

"Le 3 Janvier, 1836. Je quitte ce pays voulant me sauver du maudit gouvernement Britannique comme mes ancêtres se sont sauvés de ce diable--Louis XIV.

"A bas les rois et les ministres tyrannique! Vive la liberté!"

Which indicates very clearly the character and the opinions of Henri Marais, and the feeling among the trek-Boers at that time.

Thus the record closes and the story of the Marais ends--that is, so far as the writings in the Bible go, for that branch of the family is now extinct.

Their last chapter I will tell in due course.

There was nothing remarkable about my introduction to Marie Marais. I

did not rescue her from any attack of a wild beast or pull her out of a raging river in a fashion suited to romance. Indeed, we interchanged our young ideas across a small and extremely massive table, which, in fact, had once done duty as a block for the chopping up of meat. To this hour I can see the hundreds of lines running criss-cross upon its surface, especially those opposite to where I used to sit.

One day, several years after my father had emigrated to the Cape, the Heer Marais arrived at our house in search, I think, of some lost oxen. He was a thin, bearded man with rather wild, dark eyes set close together, and a quick nervous manner, not in the least like that of a Dutch Boer--or so I recall him. My father received him courteously and asked him to stop to dine, which he did.

They talked together in French, a tongue that my father knew well, although he had not used it for years; Dutch he could not, or, rather, would not, speak if he could help it, and Mr. Marais preferred not to talk English. To meet someone who could converse in French delighted him, and although his version of the language was that of two centuries before and my father's was largely derived from reading, they got on very well together, if not too fast.

At length, after a pause, Mr. Marais, pointing to myself, a small and stubbly-haired youth with a sharp nose, asked my father whether he would like me to be instructed in the French tongue. The answer was that nothing would please him better.

"Although," he added severely, "to judge by my own experience where Latin and Greek are concerned, I doubt his capacity to learn anything."

So an arrangement was made that I should go over for two days in each week to Maraisfontein, sleeping there on the intervening night, and acquire a knowledge of the French tongue from a tutor whom Mr. Marais had hired to instruct his daughter in that language and other subjects. I remember that my father agreed to pay a certain proportion of this tutor's salary, a plan which suited the thrifty Boer very well indeed.

Thither, accordingly, I went in due course, nothing loth, for on the veld between our station and Maraisfontein many pauw and koran--that is, big and small bustards--were to be found, to say nothing of occasional buck, and I was allowed to carry a gun, which even in those days I could use fairly well. So to Maraisfontein I rode on the appointed day, attended by a Hottentot after-rider, a certain Hans, of whom I shall have a good deal to tell. I enjoyed very good sport on the road, arriving at the stead laden with one pauw, two koran, and a little klipspringer buck which I had been lucky enough to shoot as it bounded out of some rocks in front of me.

There was a peach orchard planted round Maraisfontein, which just then was a mass of lovely pink blossom, and as I rode through it slowly, not being sure of my way to the house, a lanky child appeared in front of me, clad in a frock which exactly matched the colour of the peach bloom.

I can see her now, her dark hair hanging down her back, and her big, shy eyes staring at me from the shadow of the Dutch "kappie" which she wore. Indeed, she seemed to be all eyes, like a "dikkop" or thick-headed plover; at any rate, I noted little else about her.

I pulled up my pony and stared at her, feeling very shy and not knowing what to say. For a while she stared back at me, being afflicted, presumably, with the same complaint, then spoke with an effort, in a voice that was very soft and pleasant.

"Are you the little Allan Quatermain who is coming to learn French with me?" she asked in Dutch.

"Of course," I answered in the same tongue, which I knew well; "but why do you call me little, missie? I am taller than you," I added indignantly, for when I was young my lack of height was always a sore point with me.

"I think not," she replied. "But get off that horse, and we will measure here against this wall."

So I dismounted, and, having assured herself that I had no heels to my boots (I was wearing the kind of raw-hide slippers that the Boers call "veld-shoon"), she took the writing slate which she was carrying--it had no frame, I remember, being, in fact, but a piece of the material used for roofing--and, pressing it down tight on my stubbly hair, which stuck

up then as now, made a deep mark in the soft sandstone of the wall with the hard pointed pencil.

"There," she said, "that is justly done. Now, little Allan, it is your turn to measure me."

So I measured her, and, behold! she was the taller by a whole half-inch.

"You are standing on tiptoe," I said in my vexation.

"Little Allan," she replied, "to stand on tiptoe would be to lie before the good Lord, and when you come to know me better you will learn that, though I have a dreadful temper and many other sins, I do not lie."

I suppose that I looked snubbed and mortified, for she went on in her grave, grown-up way: "Why are you angry because God made me taller than you? especially as I am whole months older, for my father told me so. Come, let us write our names against these marks, so that in a year or two you may see how you outgrow me." Then with the slate pencil she scratched "Marie" against her mark very deeply, so that it might last, she said; after which I wrote "Allan" against mine.

Alas! Within the last dozen years chance took me past Maraisfontein once more. The house had long been rebuilt, but this particular wall yet stood. I rode to it and looked, and there faintly could still be seen the name Marie, against the little line, and by it the mark that I had

made. My own name and with it subsequent measurements were gone, for in the intervening forty years or so the sandstone had flaked away in places. Only her autograph remained, and when I saw it I think that I felt even worse than I did on finding whose was the old Bible that I had bought upon the market square at Maritzburg.

I know that I rode away hurriedly without even stopping to inquire into whose hands the farm had passed. Through the peach orchard I rode, where the trees--perhaps the same, perhaps others--were once more in bloom, for the season of the year was that when Marie and I first met, nor did I draw rein for half a score of miles.

But here I may state that Marie always stayed just half an inch the taller in body, and how much taller in mind and spirit I cannot tell.

When we had finished our measuring match Marie turned to lead me to the house, and, pretending to observe for the first time the beautiful bustard and the two koran hanging from my saddle, also the klipspringer buck that Hans the Hottentot carried behind him on his horse, asked:

"Did you shoot all these, Allan Quatermain?"

"Yes," I answered proudly; "I killed them in four shots, and the pauw and koran were flying, not sitting, which is more than you could have done, although you are taller, Miss Marie."

"I do not know," she answered reflectively. "I can shoot very well with a rifle, for my father has taught me, but I never would shoot at living things unless I must because I was hungry, for I think that to kill is cruel. But, of course, it is different with men," she added hastily, "and no doubt you will be a great hunter one day, Allan Quatermain, since you can already aim so well."

"I hope so," I answered, blushing at the compliment, "for I love hunting, and when there are so many wild things it does not matter if we kill a few. I shot these for you and your father to eat."

"Come, then, and give them to him. He will thank you," and she led the way through the gate in the sandstone wall into the yard, where the outbuildings stood in which the riding horses and the best of the breeding cattle were kept at night, and so past the end of the long, one-storied house, that was stone-built and whitewashed, to the stoep or veranda in front of it.

On the broad stoep, which commanded a pleasant view over rolling, park-like country, where mimosa and other trees grew in clumps, two men were seated, drinking strong coffee, although it was not yet ten o'clock in the morning.

Hearing the sound of the horses, one of these, Mynheer Marais, whom I already knew, rose from his hide-strung chair. He was, as I think I

have said, not in the least like one of the phlegmatic Boers, either in person or in temperament, but, rather, a typical Frenchman, although no member of his race had set foot in France for a hundred and fifty years. At least so I discovered afterwards, for, of course, in those days I knew nothing of Frenchmen.

His companion was also French, Leblanc by name, but of a very different stamp. In person he was short and stout. His large head was bald except for a fringe of curling, iron-grey hair which grew round it just above the ears and fell upon his shoulders, giving him the appearance of a tonsured but dishevelled priest. His eyes were blue and watery, his mouth was rather weak, and his cheeks were pale, full and flabby. When the Heer Marais rose, I, being an observant youth, noted that Monsieur Leblanc took the opportunity to stretch out a rather shaky hand and fill up his coffee cup out of a black bottle, which from the smell I judged to contain peach brandy.

In fact, it may as well be said at once that the poor man was a drunkard, which explains how he, with all his high education and great ability, came to hold the humble post of tutor on a remote Boer farm. Years before, when under the influence of drink, he had committed some crime in France--I don't know what it was, and never inquired--and fled to the Cape to avoid prosecution. Here he obtained a professorship at one of the colleges, but after a while appeared in the lecture-room quite drunk and lost his employment. The same thing happened in other towns, till at last he drifted to distant Maraisfontein, where his

employer tolerated his weakness for the sake of the intellectual companionship for which something in his own nature seemed to crave. Also, he looked upon him as a compatriot in distress, and a great bond of union between them was their mutual and virulent hatred of England and the English, which in the case of Monsieur Leblanc, who in his youth had fought at Waterloo and been acquainted with the great Emperor, was not altogether unnatural.

Henri Marais's case was different, but of that I shall have more to say later.

"Ah, Marie," said her father, speaking in Dutch, "so you have found him at last," and he nodded towards me, adding: "You should be flattered, little man. Look you, this missie has been sitting for two hours in the sun waiting for you, although I told her you would not arrive much before ten o'clock, as your father the prédicant said you would breakfast before you started. Well, it is natural, for she is lonely here, and you are of an age, although of a different race"; and his face darkened as he spoke the words.

"Father," answered Marie, whose blushes I could see even in the shadow of her cap, "I was not sitting in the sun, but under the shade of a peach tree. Also, I was working out the sums that Monsieur Leblanc set me on my slate. See, here they are," and she held up the slate, which was covered with figures, somewhat smudged, it is true, by the rubbing of my stiff hair and of her cap.

Then Monsieur Leblanc broke in, speaking in French, of which, as it chanced I understood the sense, for my father had grounded me in that tongue, and I am naturally quick at modern languages. At any rate, I made out that he was asking if I was the little "cochon d'anglais," or English pig, whom for his sins he had to teach. He added that he judged I must be, as my hair stuck up on my head--I had taken off my hat out of politeness--as it naturally would do on a pig's back.

This was too much for me, so, before either of the others could speak, I answered in Dutch, for rage made me eloquent and bold:

"Yes, I am he; but, mynheer, if you are to be my master, I hope you will not call the English pigs any more to me."

"Indeed, gamin" (that is, little scamp), "and pray, what will happen if I am so bold as to repeat that truth?"

"I think, mynheer," I replied, growing white with rage at this new insult, "the same that has happened to yonder buck," and I pointed to the klipspringer behind Hans's saddle. "I mean that I shall shoot you."

"Peste! Au moins il a du courage, cet enfant" (At least the child is plucky), exclaimed Monsieur Leblanc, astonished. From that moment, I may add, he respected me, and never again insulted my country to my face.

Then Marais broke out, speaking in Dutch that I might understand:

"It is you who should be called pig, Leblanc, not this boy, for, early as it is, you have been drinking. Look! the brandy bottle is half empty. Is that the example you set to the young? Speak so again and I turn you out to starve on the veld. Allan Quatermain, although, as you may have heard, I do not like the English, I beg your pardon. I hope you will forgive the words this sot spoke, thinking that you did not understand," and he took off his hat and bowed to me quite in a grand manner, as his ancestors might have done to a king of France.

Leblanc's face fell. Then he rose and walked away rather unsteadily; as I learned afterwards, to plunge his head in a tub of cold water and swallow a pint of new milk, which were his favourite antidotes after too much strong drink. At any rate, when he appeared again, half an hour later, to begin our lesson, he was quite sober, and extremely polite.

When he had gone, my childish anger being appeased, I presented the Heer Marais with my father's compliments, also with the buck and the birds, whereof the latter seemed to please him more than the former. Then my saddle-bags were taken to my room, a little cupboard of a place next to that occupied by Monsieur Leblanc, and Hans was sent to turn the horses out with the others belonging to the farm, having first knee-haltered them tightly, so that they should not run away home.

This done, the Heer Marais showed me the room in which we were to have

our lessons, one of the "sitkammer", or sitting chambers, whereof, unlike most Boer stead, this house boasted two. I remember that the floor was made of "daga", that is, ant-heap earth mixed with cow-dung, into which thousands of peach-stones had been thrown while it was still soft, in order to resist footwear--a rude but fairly efficient

expedient, and one not unpleasing to the eye. For the rest, there was one window opening on to the veranda, which, in that bright climate, admitted a shaded but sufficient light, especially as it always stood open; the ceiling was of unplastered reeds; a large bookcase stood in the corner containing many French works, most of them the property of Monsieur Leblanc, and in the centre of the room was the strong, rough table made of native yellow-wood, that once had served as a butcher's block. I recollect also a coloured print of the great Napoleon commanding at some battle in which he was victorious, seated upon a white horse and waving a field-marshal's baton over piles of dead and wounded; and near the window, hanging to the reeds of the ceiling, the nest of a pair of red-tailed swallows, pretty creatures that, notwithstanding the mess they made, afforded to Marie and me endless amusement in the intervals of our work.

When, on that day, I shuffled shyly into this homely place, and, thinking myself alone there, fell to examining it, suddenly I was brought to a standstill by a curious choking sound which seemed to proceed from the shadows behind the bookcase. Wondering as to its cause, I advanced cautiously to discover a pink-clad shape standing in the

corner like a naughty child, with her head resting against the wall, and sobbing slowly.

"Marie Marais, why do you cry?" I asked.

She turned, tossing back the locks of long, black hair which hung about her face, and answered:

"Allan Quatermain, I cry because of the shame which has been put upon you and upon our house by that drunken Frenchman."

"What of that?" I asked. "He only called me a pig, but I think I have shown him that even a pig has tusks."

"Yes," she replied, "but it was not you he meant; it was all the English, whom he hates; and the worst of it is that my father is of his mind. He, too, hates the English, and, oh! I am sure that trouble will come of his hatred, trouble and death to many."

"Well, if so, we have nothing to do with it, have we?" I replied with the cheerfulness of extreme youth.

"What makes you so sure?" she said solemnly. "Hush! here comes Monsieur Leblanc."