CHAPTER II. THE ATTACK ON MARAISFONTEIN

I do not propose to set out the history of the years which I spent in acquiring a knowledge of French and various other subjects, under the tuition of the learned but prejudiced Monsieur Leblanc. Indeed, there is "none to tell, sir." When Monsieur Leblanc was sober, he was a most excellent and well-informed tutor, although one apt to digress into many side issues, which in themselves were not uninstructive. When tipsy, he grew excited and harangued us, generally upon politics and religion, or rather its reverse, for he was an advanced freethinker, although this was a side to his character which, however intoxicated he might be, he always managed to conceal from the Heer Marais. I may add that a certain childish code of honour prevented us from betraying his views on this and sundry other matters. When absolutely drunk, which, on an average, was not more than once a month, he simply slept, and we did what we pleased--a fact which our childish code of honour also prevented us from betraying.

But, on the whole, we got on very well together, for, after the incident of our first meeting, Monsieur Leblanc was always polite to me. Marie he adored, as did every one about the place, from her father down to the meanest slave. Need I add that I adored her more than all of them put together, first with the love that some children have for each other, and afterwards, as we became adult, with that wider love by which it is at once transcended and made complete. Strange would it have been

if this were not so, seeing that we spent nearly half of every week practically alone together, and that, from the first, Marie, whose nature was as open as the clear noon, never concealed her affection for me. True, it was a very discreet affection, almost sisterly, or even motherly, in its outward and visible aspects, as though she could never forget that extra half-inch of height or month or two of age.

Moreover, from a child she was a woman, as an Irishman might say, for circumstances and character had shaped her thus. Not much more than a year before we met, her mother, whose only child she was, and whom she loved with all her strong and passionate heart, died after a lingering illness, leaving her in charge of her father and his house. I think it was this heavy bereavement in early youth which coloured her nature with a grey tinge of sadness and made her seem so much older than her years.

So the time went on, I worshipping Marie in my secret thought, but saying nothing about it, and Marie talking of and acting towards me as though I were her dear younger brother. Nobody, not even her father or mine, or Monsieur Leblanc, took the slightest notice of this queer relationship, or seemed to dream that it might lead to ultimate complications which, in fact, would have been very distasteful to them all for reasons that I will explain.

Needless to say, in due course, as they were bound to do, those complications arose, and under pressure of great physical and moral excitement the truth came out. It happened thus.

Every reader of the history of the Cape Colony has heard of the great Kaffir War of 1835. That war took place for the most part in the districts of Albany and Somerset, so that we inhabitants of Cradock, on the whole, suffered little. Therefore, with the natural optimism and carelessness of danger of dwellers in wild places, we began to think ourselves fairly safe from attack. Indeed, so we should have been, had it not been for a foolish action on the part of Monsieur Leblanc.

It seems that on a certain Sunday, a day that I always spent at home with my father, Monsieur Leblanc rode out alone to some hills about five miles distant from Maraisfontein. He had often been cautioned that this was an unsafe thing to do, but the truth is that the foolish man thought he had found a rich copper mine in these hills, and was anxious that no one should share his secret. Therefore, on Sundays, when there were no lessons, and the Heer Marais was in the habit of celebrating family prayers, which Leblanc disliked, it was customary for him to ride to these hills and there collect geological specimens and locate the strike of his copper vein. On this particular Sabbath, which was very hot, after he had done whatever he intended to do, he dismounted from his horse, a tame old beast. Leaving it loose, he partook of the meal he had brought with him, which seems to have included a bottle of peach brandy that induced slumber.

Waking up towards evening, he found that his horse had gone, and at once jumped to the conclusion that it had been stolen by Kaffirs, although

in truth the animal had but strolled over a ridge in search of grass. Running hither and thither to seek it, he presently crossed this ridge and met the horse, apparently being led away by two of the Red Kaffirs, who, as was usual, were armed with assegais. As a matter of fact these men had found the beast, and, knowing well to whom it belonged, were seeking its owner, whom, earlier in the day, they had seen upon the hills, in order to restore it to him. This, however, never occurred to the mind of Monsieur Leblanc, excited as it was by the fumes of the peach brandy.

Lifting the double-barrelled gun he carried, he fired at the first Kaffir, a young man who chanced to be the eldest son and heir of the chief of the tribe, and, as the range was very close, shot him dead. Thereon his companion, leaving go of the horse, ran for his life. At him Leblanc fired also, wounding him slightly in the thigh, but no more, so that he escaped to tell the tale of what he and every other native for miles round considered a wanton and premeditated murder. The deed done, the fiery old Frenchman mounted his nag and rode quietly home. On the road, however, as the peach brandy evaporated from his brain, doubts entered it, with the result that he determined to say nothing of his adventure to Henri Marais, who he knew was particularly anxious to avoid any cause of quarrel with the Kaffirs.

So he kept his own counsel and went to bed. Before he was up next morning the Heer Marais, suspecting neither trouble nor danger, had ridden off to a farm thirty miles or more away to pay its owner for some

cattle which he had recently bought, leaving his home and his daughter quite unprotected, except by Leblanc and the few native servants, who were really slaves, that lived about the place.

Now on the Monday night I went to bed as usual, and slept, as I have always done through life, like a top, till about four in the morning, when I was awakened by someone tapping at the glass of my window. Slipping from the bed, I felt for my pistol, as it was quite dark, crept to the window, opened it, and keeping my head below the level of the sill, fearing lest its appearance should be greeted with an assegai, asked who was there.

"Me, baas," said the voice of Hans, our Hottentot servant, who, it will be remembered, had accompanied me as after-rider when first I went to Maraisfontein. "I have bad news. Listen. The baas knows that I have been out searching for the red cow which was lost. Well, I found her, and was sleeping by her side under a tree on the veld when, about two hours ago, a woman whom I know came up to my camp fire and woke me. I asked her what she was doing at that hour of the night, and she answered that she had come to tell me something. She said that some young men of the tribe of the chief Quabie, who lives in the hills yonder, had been visiting at their kraal, and that a few hours before a messenger had arrived from the chief saying that they must return at once, as this morning at dawn he and all his men were going to attack Maraisfontein and kill everyone in it and take the cattle!"

"Good God!" I ejaculated. "Why?"

"Because, young baas," drawled the Hottentot from the other side of the window, "because someone from Maraisfontein--I think it was the Vulture" (the natives gave this name to Leblanc on account of his bald head and hooked nose)--"shot Quabie's son on Sunday when he was holding his horse."

"Good God!" I said again, "the old fool must have been drunk. When did you say the attack was to be--at dawn?" and I glanced at the stars, adding, "Why, that will be within less than an hour, and the Baas Marais is away."

"Yes," croaked Hans; "and Missie Marie--think of what the Red Kaffirs will do with Missie Marie when their blood is up."

I thrust my fist through the window and struck the Hottentot's toad-like face on which the starlight gleamed faintly.

"Dog!" I said, "saddle my mare and the roan horse and get your gun. In two minutes I come. Be swift or I kill you."

"I go," he answered, and shot out into the night like a frightened snake.

Then I began to dress, shouting as I dressed, till my father and the

Kaffirs ran into the room. As I threw on my things I told them all.

"Send out messengers," I said, "to Marais--he is at Botha's farm--and to all the neighbours. Send, for your lives; gather up the friendly Kaffirs and ride like hell for Maraisfontein. Don't talk to me, father; don't talk! Go and do what I tell you. Stay! Give me two guns, fill the saddle-bags with powder tins and loopers, and tie them to my mare. Oh! be quick, be quick!"

Now at length they understood, and flew this way and that with candles and lanterns. Two minutes later--it could scarcely have been more--I was in front of the stables just as Hans led out the bay mare, a famous beast that for two years I had saved all my money to buy. Someone strapped on the saddle-bags while I tested the girths; someone else appeared with the stout roan stallion that I knew would follow the mare to the death. There was not time to saddle him, so Hans clambered on to his back like a monkey, holding two guns under his arm, for I carried but one and my double-barrelled pistol.

"Send off the messengers," I shouted to my father. "If you would see me again send them swiftly, and follow with every man you can raise."

Then we were away with fifteen miles to do and five-and-thirty minutes before the dawn.

"Softly up the slope," I said to Hans, "till the beasts get their wind,

and then ride as you never rode before."

Those first two miles of rising ground! I thought we should never come to the end of them, and yet I dared not let the mare out lest she should bucket herself. Happily she and her companion, the stallion--a most enduring horse, though not so very swift--had stood idle for the last thirty hours, and, of course, had not eaten or drunk since sunset. Therefore being in fine fettle, they were keen for the business; also we were light weights.

I held in the mare as she spurted up the rise, and the horse kept his pace to hers. We reached its crest, and before us lay the great level plain, eleven miles of it, and then two miles down hill to Maraisfontein.

"Now," I said to Hans, shaking loose the reins, "keep up if you can!"

Away sped the mare till the keen air of the night sung past my ears, and behind her strained the good roan horse with the Hottentot monkey on its back. Oh! what a ride was that!

Further I have gone for a like cause, but never at such speed, for I knew the strength of the beasts and how long it would last them. Half an hour of it they might endure; more, and at this pace they must founder or die.

And yet such was the agony of my fear, that it seemed to me as though I only crept along the ground like a tortoise.

The roan was left behind, the sound of his foot-beats died away, and I was alone with the night and my fear. Mile added itself to mile, for now and again the starlight showed me a stone or the skeleton of some dead beast that I knew. Once I dashed into a herd of trekking game so suddenly, that a springbok, unable to stop itself, leapt right over me. Once the mare put her foot in an ant-bear hole and nearly fell, but recovered herself--thanks be to God, unharmed--and I worked myself back into the saddle whence I had been almost shaken. If I had fallen; oh! if I had fallen!

We were near the end of the flat, and she began to fail. I had over-pressed her; the pace was too tremendous. Her speed lessened to an ordinary fast gallop as she faced the gentle rise that led to the brow. And now, behind me, once more I heard the sound of the hoofs of the roan. The tireless beast was coming up. By the time we reached the edge of the plateau he was quite near, not fifty yards behind, for I heard him whinny faintly.

Then began the descent. The morning star was setting, the east grew grey with light. Oh! could we get there before the dawn? Could we get there before the dawn? That is what my horse's hoofs beat out to me.

Now I could see the mass of the trees about the stead. And now I dashed

into something, though until I was through it, I did not know that it was a line of men, for the faint light gleamed upon the spear of one of them who had been overthrown!

So it was no lie! The Kaffirs were there! As I thought it, a fresh horror filled my heart; perhaps their murdering work was already done and they were departing.

The minute of suspense--or was it but seconds?--seemed an eternity. But it ended at last. Now I was at the door in the high wall that enclosed the outbuildings at the back of the house, and there, by an inspiration, pulled up the mare--glad enough she was to stop, poor thing--for it occurred to me that if I rode to the front I should very probably be assegaied and of no further use. I tried the door, which was made of stout stinkwood planks. By design, or accident, it had been left unbolted. As I thrust it open Hans arrived with a rush, clinging to the roan with his face hidden in its mane. The beast pulled up by the side of the mare which it had been pursuing, and in the faint light I saw that an assegai was fixed in its flank.

Five seconds later we were in the yard and locking and barring the door behind us. Then, snatching the saddle-bags of ammunition from the horses, we left them standing there, and I ran for the back entrance of the house, bidding Hans rouse the natives, who slept in the outbuildings, and follow with them. If any one of them showed signs of treachery he was to shoot him at once. I remember that as I went I tore

the spear out of the stallion's flank and brought it away with me.

Now I was hammering upon the back door of the house, which I could not open. After a pause that seemed long, a window was thrown wide, and a voice--it was Marie's--asked in frightened tones who was there.

"I, Allan Quatermain," I answered. "Open at once, Marie. You are in great danger; the Red Kaffirs are going to attack the house."

She flew to the door in her nightdress, and at length I was in the place.

"Thank God! you are still safe," I gasped. "Put on your clothes while I call Leblanc. No, stay, do you call him; I must wait here for Hans and your slaves."

Away she sped without a word, and presently Hans arrived, bringing with him eight frightened men, who as yet scarcely knew whether they slept or woke.

"Is that all?" I asked. "Then bar the door and follow me to the 'sitkammer', where the baas keeps his guns."

Just as we reached it, Leblanc entered, clad in his shirt and trousers, and was followed presently by Marie with a candle.

"What is it?" he asked.

I took the candle from Marie's hand, and set it on the floor close to the wall, lest it should prove a target for an assegai or a bullet. Even in those days the Kaffirs had a few firearms, for the most part captured or stolen from white men. Then in a few words I told them all.

"And when did you learn all this?" asked Leblanc in French.

"At the Mission Station a little more than half an hour ago," I answered, looking at my watch.

"At the station a little more than half an hour ago! Peste! it is not possible. You dream or are drunken," he cried excitedly.

"All right, monsieur, we will argue afterwards," I answered. "Meanwhile the Kaffirs are here, for I rode through them; and if you want to save your life, stop talking and act. Marie, how many guns are there?"

"Four," she answered, "of my father's; two 'roers' and two smaller ones."

"And how many of these men"--and I pointed to the Kaffirs--"can shoot?"

"Three well and one badly, Allan."

"Good," I said. "Let them load the guns with 'loopers'"--that is, slugs, not bullets--"and let the rest stand in the passage with their assegais, in case the Quabies should try to force the back door."

Now, in this house there were in all but six windows, one to each sitting-room, one to each of the larger bedrooms, these four opening on to the veranda, and one at either end of the house, to give light and air to the two small bedrooms, which were approached through the larger bedrooms. At the back, fortunately, there were no windows, for the stead was but one room deep with passage running from the front to the back door, a distance of little over fifteen feet.

As soon as the guns were loaded I divided up the men, a man with a gun at each window. The right-hand sitting-room window I took myself with two guns, Marie coming with me to load, which, like all girls in that wild country, she could do well enough. So we arranged ourselves in a rough-and-ready fashion, and while we were doing it felt quite cheerful--that is, all except Monsieur Leblanc, who, I noticed, seemed very much disturbed.

I do not for one moment mean to suggest that he was afraid, as he might well have been, for he was an extremely brave and even rash man; but I think the knowledge that his drunken act had brought this terrible danger upon us all weighed on his mind. Also there may have been more; some subtle fore-knowledge of the approaching end to a life that, when all allowances were made, could scarcely be called well spent. At any

rate he fidgeted at his window-place cursing beneath his breath, and soon, as I saw out of the corner of my eye, began to have recourse to his favourite bottle of peach brandy, which he fetched out of a cupboard.

The slaves, too, were gloomy, as all natives are when suddenly awakened in the night; but as the light grew they became more cheerful. It is a poor Kaffir that does not love fighting, especially when he has a gun and a white man or two to lead him.

Now that we had made such little preparations as we could, which, by the way, I supplemented by causing some furniture to be piled up against the front and back doors, there came a pause, which, speaking for my own part--being, after all, only a lad at the time--I found very trying to the nerves. There I stood at my window with the two guns, one a double-barrel and one a single "roer", or elephant gun, that took a tremendous charge, but both, be it remembered, flint locks; for, although percussion caps had been introduced, we were a little behind the times in Cradock. There, too, crouched on the ground beside me, holding the ammunition ready for re-loading, her long, black hair flowing about her shoulders, was Marie Marais, now a well-grown young woman. In the intense silence she whispered to me:

"Why did you come here, Allan? You were safe yonder, and now you will probably be killed."

"To try to save you," I answered simply. "What would you have had me do?"

"To try to save me? Oh! that is good of you, but you should have thought of yourself."

"Then I should still have thought of you, Marie."

"Why, Allan?"

"Because you are myself and more than myself. If anything happened to you, what would my life be to me?"

"I don't quite understand, Allan," she replied, staring down at the floor. "Tell me, what do you mean?"

"Mean, you silly girl," I said; "what can I mean, except that I love you, which I thought you knew long ago."

"Oh!" she said; "now I understand." Then she raised herself upon her knees, and held up her face to me to kiss, adding, "There, that's my answer, the first and perhaps the last. Thank you, Allan dear; I am glad to have heard that, for you see one or both of us may die soon."

As she spoke the words, an assegai flashed through the window-place, passing just between our heads. So we gave over love-making and turned

our attention to war.

Now the light was beginning to grow, flowing out of the pearly eastern sky; but no attack had yet been delivered, although that one was imminent that spear fixed in the plaster of the wall behind us showed clearly. Perhaps the Kaffirs had been frightened by the galloping of horses through their line in the dark, not knowing how many of them there might have been. Or perhaps they were waiting to see better where to deliver their onset. These were the ideas that occurred to me, but both were wrong.

They were staying their hands until the mist lifted a little from the hollow below the stead where the cattle kraals were situated, for while the fog remained they could not see to get the beasts out. These they wished to make sure of and drive away before the fight began, lest during its progress something should happen to rob them of their booty.

Presently, from these kraals, where the Heer Marais's horned beasts and sheep were penned at night, about one hundred and fifty of the former and some two thousand of the latter, to say nothing of the horses, for he was a large and prosperous farmer, there arose a sound of bellowing, neighing, and baaing, and with it that of the shouting of men.

"They are driving off the stock," said Marie. "Oh! my poor father, he is ruined; it will break his heart."

"Bad enough," I answered, "but there are things that might be worse. Hark!"

As I spoke there came a sound of stamping feet and of a wild war chant. Then in the edge of the mist that hung above the hollow where the cattle kraals were, figures appeared, moving swiftly to and fro, looking ghostly and unreal. The Kaffirs were marshalling their men for the attack. A minute more and it had begun. On up the slope they came in long, wavering lines, several hundreds of them, whistling and screaming, shaking their spears, their war-plumes and hair trappings blown back by the breeze, the lust of slaughter in their rolling eyes. Two or three of them had guns, which they fired as they ran, but where the bullets went I do not know, over the house probably.

I called out to Leblanc and the Kaffirs not to shoot till I did, for I knew that they were poor marksmen and that much depended upon our first volley being effective. Then as the captain of this attack came within thirty yards of the stoep--for now the light, growing swiftly, was strong enough to enable me to distinguish him by his apparel and the rifle which he held--I loosed at him with the "roer" and shot him dead. Indeed the heavy bullet passing through his body mortally wounded another of the Quabies behind. These were the first men that I ever killed in war.

As they fell, Leblanc and the rest of our people fired also, the slugs from their guns doing great execution at that range, which was just long

enough to allow them to scatter. When the smoke cleared a little I saw that nearly a dozen men were down, and that the rest, dismayed by this reception, had halted. If they had come on then, while we were loading, doubtless they might have rushed the place; but, being unused to the terrible effects of firearms, they paused, amazed. A number of them, twenty or thirty perhaps, clustered about the bodies of the fallen Kaffirs, and, seizing my second gun, I fired both barrels at these with such fearful effect that the whole regiment took to their heels and fled, leaving their dead and wounded on the ground. As they ran our servants cheered, but I called to them to be silent and load swiftly, knowing well that the enemy would soon return.

For a time, however, nothing happened, although we could hear them talking somewhere near the cattle kraal, about a hundred and fifty yards away. Marie took advantage of this pause, I remember, to fetch food and distribute it among us. I, for one, was glad enough to get it.

Now the sun was up, a sight for which I thanked Heaven, for, at any rate, we could no longer be surprised. Also, with the daylight, some of my fear passed away, since darkness always makes danger twice as terrible to man and beast. Whilst we were still eating and fortifying the window-places as best we could, so as to make them difficult to enter, a single Kaffir appeared, waving above his head a stick to which was tied a white ox-tail as a sign of truce. I ordered that no one should fire, and when the man, who was a bold fellow, had reached the spot where the dead captain lay, called to him, asking his business, for

I could speak his language well.

He answered that he had come with a message from Quabie. This was the message: that Quabie's eldest son had been cruelly murdered by the fat white man called "Vulture" who lived with the Heer Marais, and that he, Quabie, would have blood for blood. Still, he did not wish to kill the young white chieftainess (that was Marie) or the others in the house, with whom he had no quarrel. Therefore if we would give up the fat white man that he might make him "die slowly," Quabie would be content with his life and with the cattle that he had already taken by way of a fine, and leave us and the house unmolested.

Now, when Leblanc understood the nature of this offer he went perfectly mad with mingled fear and rage, and began to shout and swear in French.

"Be silent," I said; "we do not mean to surrender you, although you have brought all this trouble on us. Your chance of life is as good as ours. Are you not ashamed to act so before these black people?"

When at last he grew more or less quiet I called to the messenger that we white folk were not in the habit of abandoning each other, and that we would live or die together. Still, I bade him tell Quabie that if we did die, the vengeance taken on him and all his people would be to wipe them out till not one of them was left, and therefore that he would do well not to cause any of our blood to flow. Also, I added, that we had thirty men in the house (which, of course, was a lie) and plenty of

ammunition and food, so that if he chose to continue the attack it would be the worse for him and his tribe.

On hearing this the herald shouted back that we should every one of us be dead before noon if he had his way. Still, he would report my words faithfully to Quabie and bring his answer.

Then he turned and began to walk off. Just as he did so a shot was fired from the house, and the man pitched forward to the ground, then rose again and staggered back towards his people, with his right shoulder shattered and his arm swinging.

"Who did that?" I asked through the smoke, which prevented me from seeing.

"I, parbleu!" shouted Leblanc. "Sapristi! that black devil wanted to torture me, Leblanc, the friend of the great Napoleon. Well, at least I have tortured him whom I meant to kill."

"Yes, you fool," I answered; "and we, too, shall be tortured because of your wickedness. You have shot a messenger carrying a flag of truce, and that the Quabies will never forgive. Oh! I tell you that you have hit us as well as him, who had it not been for you might have been spared."

These words I said quite quietly and in Dutch, so that our Kaffirs might understand them, though really I was boiling with wrath.

But Leblanc did not answer quietly.

"Who are you," he shouted, "you wretched little Englishman, who dare to lecture me, Leblanc, the friend of the great Napoleon?"

Now I drew my pistol and walked up to the man.

"Be quiet, you drunken sot," I said, for I guessed that he had drunk more of the brandy in the darkness. "If you are not quiet and do not obey me, who am in command here, either I will blow your brains out, or I will give you to these men," and I pointed to Hans and the Kaffirs, who had gathered round him, muttering ominously. "Do you know what they will do with you? They will throw you out of the house, and leave you to settle your quarrel with Quabie alone."

Leblanc looked first at the pistol, and next at the faces of the natives, and saw something in one or other of them, or in both, that caused him to change his note.

"Pardon, monsieur," he said; "I was excited. I knew not what I said. If you are young you are brave and clever, and I will obey you," and he went to his station and began to re-load his gun. As he did so a great shout of fury rose from the cattle kraal. The wounded herald had reached the Quabies and was telling them of the treachery of the white people.