

CHAPTER IV. HERNANDO PEREIRA

Several more days passed before I was allowed out of that little war-stained room of which I grew to hate the very sight. I entreated my father to take me into the air, but he would not, saying that he feared lest any movement should cause the bleeding to begin again or even the cut artery to burst. Moreover, the wound was not healing very well, the spear that caused it having been dirty or perhaps used to skin dead animals, which caused some dread of gangrene, that in those days generally meant death. As it chanced, although I was treated only with cold water, for antiseptics were then unknown, my young and healthy blood triumphed and no gangrene appeared.

What made those days even duller was that during them I saw very little of Marie, who now only entered the place in the company of her father. Once I managed to ask her why she did not come oftener and alone. Her face grew troubled as she whispered back, "Because it is not allowed, Allan," and then without another word left the place.

Why, I wondered to myself, was it not allowed, and an answer sprang up in my mind. Doubtless it was because of that tall young man who had argued with my father in the wagon-house. Marie had never spoken to me of him, but from the Hottentot Hans and my father I managed to collect a good deal of information concerning him and his business.

It appeared that he was the only child of Henri Marais's sister, who married a Portuguese from Delagoa Bay of the name of Pereira, who had come to the Cape Colony to trade many years before and settled there. Both he and his wife were dead, and their son, Hernando, Marie's cousin, had inherited all their very considerable wealth.

Indeed, now I remembered having heard this Hernando, or Hernan, as the Boers called him for short, spoken of in past years by the Heer Marais as the heir to great riches, since his father had made a large fortune by trading in wine and spirits under some Government monopoly which he held. Often he had been invited to visit Maraisfontein, but his parents, who doted on him and lived in one of the settled districts not far from Cape Town, would never allow him to travel so far from them into these wild regions.

Since their death, however, things had changed. It appeared that on the decease of old Pereira the Governor of the Colony had withdrawn the wine and spirit monopoly, which he said was a job and a scandal, an act that made Hernando Pereira very angry, although he needed no more money, and had caused him to throw himself heart and soul into the schemes of the disaffected Boers. Indeed, he was now engaged as one of the organisers of the Great Trek which was in contemplation. In fact, it had already begun, into the partially explored land beyond the borders of the Colony, where the Dutch farmers proposed to set up dominions of their own.

That was the story of Hernando Pereira, who was to be--nay, who had already become--my rival for the hand of the sweet and beautiful Marie Marais.

One night when my father and I were alone in the little room where he slept with me, and he had finished reading his evening portion of Scripture aloud, I plucked up my courage to tell him that I loved Marie and wished to marry her, and that we had plighted our troth during the attack of the Kaffirs on the stead.

"Love and war indeed!" he said, looking at me gravely, but showing no sign of surprise, for it appeared that he was already acquainted with our secret. This was not wonderful, for he informed me afterwards that during my delirium I had done nothing except rave of Marie in the most endearing terms. Also Marie herself, when I was at my worst, had burst into tears before him and told him straight out that she loved me.

"Love and war indeed!" he repeated, adding kindly, "My poor boy, I fear that you have fallen into great trouble."

"Why, father?" I asked. "Is it wrong that we should love each other?"

"Not wrong, but, in the circumstances, quite natural--I should have foreseen that it was sure to happen. No, not wrong, but most unfortunate. To begin with, I do not wish to see you marry a foreigner and become mixed up with these disloyal Boers. I hoped that one day, a

good many years hence, for you are only a boy, Allan, you would find an English wife, and I still hope it."

"Never!" I ejaculated.

"Never is a long word, Allan, and I dare say that what you are so sure is impossible will happen after all," words that made me angry enough at the time, though in after years I often thought of them.

"But," he went on, "putting my own wishes, perhaps prejudices, aside, I think your suit hopeless. Although Henri Marais likes you well enough and is grateful to you just now because you have saved the daughter whom he loves, you must remember that he hates us English bitterly. I believe that he would almost as soon see his girl marry a half-caste as an Englishman, and especially a poor Englishman, as you are, and unless you can make money, must remain. I have little to leave you, Allan."

"I might make money, father, out of ivory, for instance. You know I am a good shot."

"Allan, I do not think you will ever make much money, it is not in your blood; or, if you do, you will not keep it. We are an old race, and I know our record, up to the time of Henry VIII. at any rate. Not one of us was ever commercially successful. Let us suppose, however, that you should prove yourself the exception to the rule, it can't be done at once, can it? Fortunes don't grow in a night, like mushrooms."

"No, I suppose not, father. Still, one might have some luck."

"Possibly. But meanwhile you have to fight against a man who has the luck, or rather the money in his pocket."

"What do you mean?" I asked, sitting up.

"I mean Hernando Pereira, Allan, Marais's nephew, who they say is one of the richest men in the Colony. I know that he wishes to marry Marie."

"How do you know it, father?"

"Because Marais told me so this afternoon, probably with a purpose. He was struck with her beauty when he first saw her after your escape, which he had not done since she was a child, and as he stopped to guard the house while the rest went after the Quabies--well, you can guess. Such things go quickly with these Southern men."

I hid my face in the pillow, biting my lips to keep back the groan that was ready to burst from them, for I felt the hopelessness of the situation. How could I compete with this rich and fortunate man, who naturally would be favoured of my betrothed's father? Then on the blackness of my despair rose a star of hope. I could not, but perchance Marie might. She was very strong-natured and very faithful. She was not to be bought, and I doubted whether she could be frightened.

"Father," I said, "I may never marry Marie, but I don't think that Hernando Pereira ever will either."

"Why not, my boy?"

"Because she loves me, father, and she is not one to change. I believe that she would rather die."

"Then she must be a very unusual sort of woman. Still, it may be so; the future will tell to those who live to see it. I can only pray and trust that whatever happens will be for the best for both of you. She is a sweet girl and I like her well, although she may be Boer--or French. And now, Allan, we have talked enough, and you had better go to sleep. You must not excite yourself, you know, or it may set up new inflammation in the wound."

"Go to sleep. Must not excite yourself." I kept muttering those words for hours, serving them up in my mind with a spice of bitter thought. At last torpor, or weakness, overcame me, and I fell into a kind of net of bad dreams which, thank Heaven! I have now forgotten. Yet when certain events happened subsequently I always thought, and indeed still think, that these or something like them, had been a part of those evil dreams.

On the morning following this conversation I was at length allowed to be carried to the stoep, where they laid me down, wrapped in a very

dirty blanket, upon a rimp-strung bench or primitive sofa. When I had satisfied my first delight at seeing the sun and breathing the fresh air, I began to study my surroundings. In front of the house, or what remained of it, so arranged that the last of them at either end we made fast to the extremities of the stoep, was arranged an arc of wagons, placed as they are in a laager and protected underneath by earth thrown up in a mound and by boughs of the mimosa thorn. Evidently these wagons, in which the guard of Boers and armed natives who still remained on the place slept at night, were set thus as a defence against a possible attack by the Quabies or other Kaffirs.

During the daytime, however, the centre wagon was drawn a little on one side to leave a kind of gate. Through this opening I saw that a long wall, also semicircular, had been built outside of them, enclosing a space large enough to contain at night all the cattle and horses that were left to the Heer Marais, together with those of his friends, who evidently did not wish to see their oxen vanish into the depths of the mountains. In the middle of this extemporised kraal was a long, low mound, which, as I learned afterwards, contained the dead who fell in the attack on the house. The two slaves who had been killed in the defence were buried in the little garden that Marie had made, and the headless body of Leblanc in a small walled place to the right of the stead, where lay some of its former owners and one or two relatives of the Heer Marais, including his wife.

Whilst I was noting these things Marie appeared at the end of the

veranda, having come round the burnt part of the house, followed by Hernan Pereira. Catching sight of me, she ran to the side of my couch with outstretched arms as though she intended to embrace me. Then seeming to remember, stopped suddenly at my side, coloured to her hair, and said in an embarrassed voice:

"Oh, Heer Allan"--she had never called me Heer in her life before--"I am so glad to find you out! How have you been getting on?"

"Pretty well, I thank you," I answered, biting my lips, "as you would have learnt, Marie, had you come to see me."

Next moment I was sorry for the words, for I saw her eyes fill with tears and her breast shake with something like a sob. However, it was Pereira and not Marie who answered, for at the moment I believe she could not speak.

"My good boy," he said in a pompous, patronising way and in English, which he knew perfectly, "I think that my cousin has had plenty to do caring for all these people during the last few days without running to look at the cut in your leg. However, I am glad to hear from your worthy father that it is almost well and that you will soon be able to play games again, like others of your age."

Now it was my turn to be unable to speak and to feel my eyes fill with tears, tears of rage, for remember that I was still very feeble. But

Marie spoke for me.

"Yes, Cousin Hernan," she said in a cold voice, "thank God the Heer Allan Quatermain will soon be able to play games again, such bloody games as the defence of Maraisfontein with eight men against all the Quabie horde. Then Heaven help those who stand in front of his rifle," and she glanced at the mound that covered the dead Kaffirs, many of whom, as a matter of fact, I had killed.

"Oh! no offence, no offence, Marie," said Pereira in his smooth, rich voice. "I did not want to laugh at your young friend, who doubtless is as brave as they say all Englishmen are, and who fought well when he was lucky enough to have the chance of protecting you, my dear cousin. But after all, you know, he is not the only one who can hold a gun straight, as you seem to think, which I shall be happy to prove to him in a friendly fashion when he is stronger."

Here he stepped forward a pace and looked down at me, then added with a laugh, "Allemachte! I fear that won't be just at present. Why, the lad looks as though one might blow him away like a feather."

Still I said nothing, only glanced up at this tall and splendid man standing above me in his fine clothes, for he was richly dressed as the fashion of the time went, with his high colouring, broad shoulders, and face full of health and vigour. Mentally I compared him with myself, as I was after my fever and loss of blood, a poor, white-faced rat of

a lad, with stubbly brown hair on my head and only a little down on my chin, with arms like sticks, and a dirty blanket for raiment. How could I compare with him in any way? What chance had I against this opulent bully who hated me and all my race, and in whose hands, even if I were well, I should be nothing but a child?

And yet, and yet as I lay there humiliated and a mock, an answer came into my mind, and I felt that whatever might be the case with my outward form; in spirit, in courage, in determination and in ability, in all, in short, that really makes a man, I was more than Pereira's equal. Yes, and that by the help of these qualities, poor as I was and frail as I seemed to be, I would beat him at the last and keep for myself what I had won, the prize of Marie's love.

Such were the thoughts which passed through me, and I think that something of the tenor of them communicated itself to Marie, who often could read my heart before my lips spoke. At any rate, her demeanour changed. She drew herself up. Her fine nostrils expanded and a proud look came into her dark eyes, as she nodded her head and murmured in a voice so low that I think I alone caught her words:

"Yes, yes, have no fear."

Pereira was speaking again (he had turned aside to strike the steel of his tinder-box, and was now blowing the spark to a glow before lighting his big pipe).

"By the way, Heer Allan," he said, "that is a very good mare of yours. She seems to have done the distance between the Mission Station and Maraisfontein in wonderful time, as, for the matter of that, the roan did too. I have taken a fancy to her, after a gallop on her back yesterday just to give her some exercise, and although I don't know that she is quite up to my weight, I'll buy her."

"The mare is not for sale, Heer Pereira," I said, speaking for the first time, "and I do not remember giving anyone leave to exercise her."

"No, your father did, or was it that ugly little beast of a Hottentot? I forget which. As for her not being for sale--why, in this world everything is for sale, at a price. I'll give you--let me see--oh, what does the money matter when one has plenty? I'll give you a hundred English pounds for that mare; and don't you think me a fool. I tell you I mean to get it back, and more, at the great races down in the south. Now what do you say?"

"I say that the mare is not for sale, Heer Pereira." Then a thought struck me, or an inspiration, and, as has always been my fashion, I acted on it at once. "But," I added slowly, "if you like, when I am a bit stronger I'll shoot you a match for her, you staking your hundred pounds and I staking the mare."

Pereira burst out laughing.

"Here, friends," he called to some of the Boers who were strolling up to the house for their morning coffee. "This little Englishman wants to shoot a match with me, staking that fine mare of his against a hundred pounds British; against me, Hernando Pereira, who have won every prize at shooting that ever I entered for. No, no, friend Allan, I am not a thief, I will not rob you of your mare."

Now among those Boers chanced to be the celebrated Heer Pieter Retief, a very fine man of high character, then in the prime of life, and of Huguenot descent like Heer Marais. He had been appointed by the Government one of the frontier commandants, but owing to some quarrel with the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Andries Stockenstrom, had recently resigned that office, and at this date was engaged in organizing the trek from the Colony. I now saw Retief for the first time, and ah! then little did I think how and where I should see him for the last. But all that is a matter of history, of which I shall have to tell later.

Now, while Pereira was mocking and bragging of his prowess, Pieter Retief looked at me, and our eyes met.

"Allemachte!" he exclaimed, "is that the young man who, with half a dozen miserable Hottentots and slaves, held this stead for five hours against all the Quabie tribe and kept them out?"

Somebody said that it was, remarking that I had been about to shoot

Marie Marais and myself when help came.

"Then, Heer Allan Quatermain," said Retief, "give me your hand," and he took my poor wasted fingers in his big palm, adding, "Your father must be proud of you to-day, as I should be if I had such a son. God in Heaven! where will you stop if you can go so far while you are yet a boy? Friends, since I came here yesterday I have got the whole story for myself from the Kaffirs and from this 'mooi meisje'" (pretty young lady), and he nodded towards Marie. "Also I have gone over the ground and the house, and have seen where each man fell--it is easy by the blood marks--most of them shot by yonder Englishman, except one of the last three, whom he killed with a spear. Well, I tell you that never in all my experience have I known a better arranged or a more finely carried out defence against huge odds. Perhaps the best part of it, too, was the way in which this young lion acted on the information he received and the splendid ride he made from the Mission Station. Again I say that his father should be proud of him."

"Well, if it comes to that, I am, mynheer," said my father, who just then joined us after his morning walk, "although I beg you to say no more lest the lad should grow vain."

"Bah!" replied Retief, "fellows of his stamp are not vain; it is your big talkers who are vain," and he glanced out of the corner of his shrewd eye at Pereira, "your turkey cocks with all their tails spread. I think this little chap must be such another as that great sailor of

yours--what do you call him, Nelson?--who beat the French into frothed eggs and died to live for ever. He was small, too, they say, and weak in the stomach."

I must confess I do not think that praise ever sounded sweeter in my ears than did these words of the Commandant Retief, uttered as they were just when I felt crushed to the dirt. Moreover, as I saw by Marie's and, I may add, by my father's face, there were other ears to which they were not ungrateful. The Boers also, brave and honest men enough, evidently appreciated them, for they said:

"Ja! ja! das ist recht" (That is right).

Only Pereira turned his broad back and busied himself with relighting his pipe, which had gone out.

Then Retief began again.

"What is it you were calling us to listen to, Mynheer Pereira? That this Heer Allan Quatermain had offered to shoot you a match? Well, why not? If he can hit Kaffirs running at him with spears, as he has done, he may be able to hit other things also. You say that you won't rob him of his money--no, it was his beautiful horse--because you have taken so many prizes shooting at targets. But did you ever hit a Kaffir running at you with an assegai, mynheer, you who live down there where everything is safe? If so, I never heard of it."

Pereira answered that he did not understand me to propose a shooting match at Kaffirs charging with assegais, but at something else--he knew not what.

"Quite so," said Retief. "Well, Mynheer Allan, what is it that you do propose?"

"That we should stand in the great kloof between the two vleis yonder--the Heer Marais knows the place--when the wild geese flight over an hour before sunset, and that he who brings down six of them in the fewest shots shall win the match."

"If our guns are loaded with loopers that will not be difficult," said Pereira.

"With loopers you would seldom kill a bird, mynheer," I replied, "for they come over from seventy to a hundred yards up. No, I mean with rifles."

"Allemachte!" broke in a Boer; "you will want plenty of ammunition to hit a goose at that height with a bullet."

"That is my offer," I said, "to which I add this, that when twenty shots have been fired by each man, he who has killed the most birds wins, even if he has not brought down the full six. Does the Heer Pereira accept?"

If so, I will venture to match myself against him, although he has won so many prizes."

The Heer Pereira seemed extremely doubtful; so doubtful, indeed, that the Boers began to laugh at him. In the end he grew rather angry, and said that he was willing to shoot me at bucks or swallows, or fireflies, or anything else I liked.

"Then let it be at geese," I answered, "since it is likely to be sometime before I am strong enough to ride after buck or other wild things."

So the terms of the match were formally written down by Marie, as my father, although he took a keen sporting interest in the result, would have nothing to do with what he called a "wager for money," and, except myself, there was no one else present with sufficient scholarship to pen a long document. Then we both signed them, Hernan Pereira not very willingly, I thought; and if my recovery was sufficiently rapid, the date was fixed for that day week. In case of any disagreement, the Heer Retief, who was staying at Maraisfontein, or in its neighbourhood, for a while, was appointed referee and stakeholder. It was also arranged that neither of us should visit the appointed place, or shoot at the geese before the match. Still we were at liberty to practise as much as we liked at anything else in the interval and to make use of any kind of rifle that suited us best.

By the time that these arrangements were finished, feeling quite tired with all the emotions of the morning, I was carried back to my room. Here my midday meal, cooked by Marie, was brought to me. As I finished eating it, for the fresh air had given me an appetite, my father came in, accompanied by the Heer Marais, and began to talk to me. Presently the latter asked me kindly enough if I thought I should be sufficiently strong to trek back to the station that afternoon in an ox-cart with springs to it and lying at full length upon a hide-strung "cartel" or mattress.

I answered, "Certainly," as I should have done had I been at the point of death, for I saw that he wished to be rid of me.

"The fact is, Allan," he said awkwardly, "I am not inhospitable as you may think, especially towards one to whom I owe so much. But you and my nephew, Hernan, do not seem to get on very well together, and, as you may guess, having just been almost beggared, I desire no unpleasantness with the only rich member of my family."

I replied I was sure I did not wish to be the cause of any. It seemed to me, however, that the Heer Pereira wished to make a mock of me and to bring it home to me what a poor creature I was compared to himself--I a mere sick boy who was worth nothing.

"I know," said Marais uneasily, "my nephew has been too fortunate in life, and is somewhat overbearing in his manner. He does not remember

that the battle is not always to the strong or the race to the swift, he who is young and rich and handsome, a spoiled child from the first. I am sorry, but what I cannot help I must put up with. If I cannot have my mealies cooked, I must eat them green. Also, Allan, have you never heard that jealousy sometimes makes people rude and unjust?" and he looked at me meaningly.

I made no answer, for when one does not quite know what to say it is often best to remain silent, and he went on:

"I am vexed to hear of this foolish shooting match which has been entered into without my knowledge or consent. If he wins he will only laugh at you the more, and if you win he will be angry."

"It was not my fault, mynheer," I answered. "He wanted to force me to sell the mare, which he had been riding without my leave, and kept bragging about his marksmanship. So at last I grew cross and challenged him."

"No wonder, Allan; I do not blame you. Still, you are silly, for it will not matter to him if he loses his money; but that beautiful mare is your ewe-lamb, and I should be sorry to see you parted from a beast which has done us so good a turn. Well, there it is; perhaps circumstances may yet put an end to this trial; I hope so."

"I hope they won't," I answered stubbornly.

"I dare say you do, being sore as a galled horse just now. But listen, Allan, and you, too, prédicant Quatermain; there are other and more important reasons than this petty squabble why I should be glad if you could go away for a while. I must take counsel with my countrymen about certain secret matters which have to do with our welfare and future, and, of course they would not like it if all the while there were two Englishmen on the place, whom they might think were spies."

"Say no more, Heer Marais," broke in my father hotly; "still less should we like to be where we are not wanted or are looked upon with suspicion for the crime of being English. By God's blessing, my son has been able to do some service to you and yours, but now that is all finished and forgotten. Let the cart you are so kind as to lend us be inspanned. We will go at once."

Then Henri Marais, who was a gentleman at bottom, although, even in those early days, violent and foolish when excited or under the influence of his race prejudices, began to apologise quite humbly, assuring my father that he forgot nothing and meant no offence. So they patched the matter up, and an hour later we started.

All the Boers came to see us off, giving me many kind words and saying how much they looked forward to meeting me again on the following Thursday. Pereira, who was among them, was also very genial, begging me to be sure and get well, since he did not wish to beat one who was still

crippled, even at a game of goose shooting. I answered that I would do my best; as for my part, I did not like being beaten in any game which I had set my heart on winning, whether it were little or big. Then I turned my head, for I was lying on my back all this time, to bid good-bye to Marie, who had slipped out of the house into the yard where the cart was.

"Good-bye, Allan," she said, giving me her hand and a look from her eyes that I trusted was not seen. Then, under pretence of arranging the kaross which was over me, she bent down and whispered swiftly:

"Win that match if you love me. I shall pray God that you may every night, for it will be an omen."

I think the whisper was heard, though not the words, for I saw Pereira bite his lip and make a movement as though to interrupt her. But Pieter Retief thrust his big form in front of him rather rudely, and said with one of his hearty laughs:

"Allemachte! friend, let the missje wish a good journey to the young fellow who saved her life."

Next moment Hans, the Hottentot, screamed at the oxen in the usual fashion, and we rolled away through the gate.

But oh! if I had liked the Heer Retief before, now I loved him.

