CHAPTER VII. ALLAN'S CALL

A fortnight later Marais, Pereira and their companions, a little band in all of about twenty men, thirty women and children, and say fifty half-breeds and Hottentot after-riders, trekked from their homes into the wilderness. I rode to the crest of a table-topped hill and watched the long line of wagons, one of them containing Marie, crawl away northward across the veld a mile or more beneath.

Sorely was I tempted to gallop after them and seek a last interview with her and her father. But my pride forbade me. Henri Marais had given out that if I came near his daughter he would have me beaten back with "sjambocks" or hide whips. Perhaps he had gained some inkling of our last farewell in the peach orchard. I do not know. But I do know that if anyone had lifted a sjambock on me I should have answered with a bullet. Then there would have been blood between us, which is worse to cross than whole rivers of wrath and jealousy. So I just watched the wagons until they vanished, and galloped home down the rock-strewn slope, wishing that the horse would stumble and break my neck.

When I reached the station, however, I was glad that it had not done so, as I found my father sitting on the stoep reading a letter that had been brought by a mounted Hottentot.

It was from Henri Marais, and ran thus:--

"'REVEREND HEER AND FRIEND QUATERMAIN,--I send this to bid you farewell, for although you are English and we have quarrelled at times, I honour you in my heart. Friend, now that we are starting, your warning words lie on me like lead, I know not why. But what is done cannot be undone, and I trust that all will come right. If not, it is because the Good Lord wills it otherwise.'"

Here my father looked up and said: "When men suffer from their own passion and folly, they always lay the blame on the back of Providence."

Then he went on, spelling out the letter:

"'I fear your boy Allan, who is a brave lad, as I have reason to know, and honest, must think that I have treated him harshly and without gratitude. But I have only done what I must do. True, Marie, who, like her mother, is very strong and stubborn in mind, swears that she will marry no one else; but soon Nature will make her forget all that, especially as such a fine husband waits for her hand. So bid Allan forget all about her also, and when he is old enough choose some English girl. I have sworn a great oath before my God that he shall never marry my daughter with my consent.

"'Friend, I write to ask you something because I trust you more than these slim agents. Half the price, a very poor one, that I have for my farm is still unpaid to me by Jacobus van der Merve, who remains behind and buys up all our lands. It is £100 English, due this day year, and I enclose you power of attorney to receive and give receipt for the same. Also there is due to me from your British Government £253 on account of slaves liberated which were worth quite £1,000. This also the paper gives you authority to receive. As regards my claims against the said cursed Government because of the loss brought on me by the Quabie Kaffirs, it will not acknowledge them, saying that the attack was caused by the Frenchman Leblanc, one of my household.'"

"And with good reason," commented my father.

"'When you have received these monies, if ever, I pray you take some safe opportunity of sending them to me, wherever I may be, which doubtless you will hear in due course, although by that time I hope to be rich again and not to need money. Farewell and God be with you, as I hope He will be with me and Marie and the rest of us trek-Boers. The bearer will overtake us with your answer at our first outspan.

"'HENRI MARAIS.'"

"Well," said my father with a sigh, "I suppose I must accept his trust, though why he should choose an 'accursed Englishman' with whom he has quarrelled violently to collect his debts instead of one of his own beloved Boers, I am sure I do not know. I will go and write to him. Allan, see that the messenger and his horse get something to eat."

I nodded and went to the man, who was one of those that had defended Maraisfontein with me, a good fellow unless he got near liquor.

"Heer Allan," he said, looking round to see that we were not overheard, "I have a little writing for you also," and he produced from his pouch a note that was unaddressed.

I tore it open eagerly. Within was written in French, which no Boer would understand if the letter fell into his hands:

"Be brave and faithful, and remember, as I shall. Oh! love of my heart, adieu, adieu!"

This message was unsigned; but what need was there of signature?

I wrote an answer of a sort that may be imagined, though what the exact words were I cannot remember after the lapse of nearly half a century. Oddly enough, it is the things I said which I recall at such a distance

of time rather than the things which I wrote, perhaps because, when once written, my mind being delivered, troubled itself with them no more. So in due course the Hottentot departed with my father's letter and my own, and that was the last direct communication which we had with Henri or Marie Marais for more than a year.

I think that those long months were on the whole the most wretched I have ever spent. The time of life which I was passing through is always trying; that period of emergence from youth into full and responsible manhood which in Africa generally takes place earlier than it does here in England, where young men often seem to me to remain boys up to five-and-twenty. The circumstances which I have detailed made it particularly so in my own case, for here was I, who should have been but a cheerful lad, oppressed with the sorrows and anxieties, and fettered by the affections of maturity.

I could not get Marie out of my mind; her image was with me by day and by night, especially by night, which caused me to sleep badly. I became morose, supersensitive, and excitable. I developed a cough, and thought, as did others, that I was going into a decline. I remember that Hans even asked me once if I would not come and peg out the exact place where I should like to be buried, so that I might be sure that there would be no mistake made when I could no longer speak for myself. On that occasion I kicked Hans, one of the few upon which I have ever touched a native. The truth was that I had not the slightest intention of being buried. I wanted to live and marry Marie, not to die and be put in

a hole by Hans. Only I saw no prospect of marrying Marie, or even of seeing her again, and that was why I felt low-spirited.

Of course, from time to time news of the trek-Boers reached us, but it was extremely confused. There were so many parties of them; their adventures were so difficult to follow, and, I may add, often so terrible; so few of them could write; trustworthy messengers were so scanty; distances were so great. At any rate, we heard nothing of Marais's band except a rumour that they had trekked to a district in what is now the Transvaal, which is called Rustenberg, and thence on towards Delagoa Bay into an unknown veld where they had vanished. From Marie herself no letter came, which showed me clearly enough that she had not found an opportunity of sending one.

Observing my depressed condition, my father suggested as a remedy that I should go to the theological college at Cape Town and prepare myself for ordination. But the Church as a career did not appeal to me, perhaps because I felt that I could never be sufficiently good; perhaps because I knew that as a clergyman I should find no opportunity of travelling north when my call came. For I always believed that this call would come.

My father, who wished that I should hear another kind of call, was vexed with me over this matter. He desired earnestly that I should follow the profession which he adorned, and indeed saw no other open for me any more than I did myself. Of course he was right in a way, seeing that in

the end I found none, unless big game hunting and Kaffir trading can be called a profession. I don't know, I am sure. Still, poor business as it may be, I say now when I am getting towards the end of life that I am glad I did not follow any other. It has suited me; that was the insignificant hole in the world's affairs which I was destined to fit, whose only gifts were a remarkable art of straight shooting and the more common one of observation mixed with a little untrained philosophy.

So hot did our arguments become about this subject of the Church, for, as may be imagined, in the course of them I revealed some unorthodoxy, especially as regards the matter of our methods of Christianising Kaffirs, that I was extremely thankful when a diversion occurred which took me away from home. The story of my defence of Maraisfontein had spread far, and that of my feats of shooting, especially in the Goose Kloof, still farther. So the end of it was that those in authority commandeered me to serve in one of the continual Kaffir frontier wars which was in progress, and instantly gave me a commission as a kind of lieutenant in a border corps.

Now the events of that particular war have nothing to do with the history that I am telling, so I do not propose even to touch on them. I served in it for a year, meeting with many adventures, one or two successes, and several failures. Once I was wounded slightly, twice I but just escaped with my life. Once I was reprimanded for taking a foolish risk and losing some men. Twice I was commended for what were called gallant actions, such as bringing a wounded comrade out of danger

under a warm fire, mostly of assegais, and penetrating by night, almost alone, into the stronghold of a chieftain, and shooting him.

At length that war was patched up with an inconclusive peace and my corps was disbanded. I returned home, no longer a lad, but a man with experience of various kinds and a rather unique knowledge of Kaffirs, their languages, history, and modes of thought and action. Also I had associated a good deal with British officers, and from them acquired much that I had found no opportunity of studying before, especially, I hope, the ideas and standards of English gentlemen.

I had not been back at the Mission Station more than three weeks, quite long enough for me to begin to be bored with idleness and inactivity, when that call for which I had been waiting came at last.

One day a "smous", that is a low kind of white man, often a Jew, who travels about trading with unsophisticated Boers and Kaffirs, and cheating them if he can, called at the station with his cartful of goods. I was about to send him away, having no liking for such gentry, when he asked me if I were named Allan Quatermain. I said "Yes," whereon he replied that he had a letter for me, and produced a packet wrapped up in sail-cloth. I asked him whence he had it, and he answered from a man whom he had met at Port Elizabeth, an east coast trader, who, hearing that he was coming into the Cradock district, entrusted him with the letter. The man told him that it was very important, and that I should reward the bearer well if it were delivered safely.

While the Jew talked (I think he was a Jew) I was opening the sail-cloth. Within was a piece of linen which had been oiled to keep out water, addressed in some red pigment to myself or my father. This, too, I opened, not without difficulty, for it was carefully sewn up, and found within it a letter-packet, also addressed to myself or my father, in the handwriting of Marie.

Great Heaven! How my heart jumped at that sight! Calling to Hans to make the smous comfortable and give him food, I went into my own room, and there read the letter, which ran thus:

"MY DEAR ALLAN,--I do not know whether the other letters I have written to you have ever come to your hands, or indeed if this one will. Still, I send it on chance by a wandering Portuguese half-breed who is going to Delagoa Bay, about fifty miles, I believe, from the place where I now write, near the Crocodile River. My father has named it Maraisfontein, after our old home. If those letters reached you, you will have learned of the terrible things we went through on our journey; the attacks by the Kaffirs in the Zoutpansberg region, who destroyed one of our parties altogether, and so forth. If not, all that story must wait, for it is too long to tell now, and, indeed, I have but little paper, and not much pencil. It will be enough to say, therefore, that to the number of thirty-five white people, men, women and children, we trekked at the beginning of the summer season, when the grass was commencing to grow,

from the Lydenburg district--an awful journey over mountains and through flooded rivers. After many delays, some of them months long, we reached this place, about eight weeks ago, for I write to you at the beginning of June, if we have kept correct account of the time, of which I am not certain.

"It is a beautiful place to look at, a flat country of rich veld, with big trees growing on it, and about two miles from the great river that is called the Crocodile. Here, finding good water, my father and Hernan Pereira, who now rules him in all things, determined to settle, although some of the others wished to push on nearer to Delagoa Bay. There was a great quarrel about it, but in the end my father, or rather Hernan, had his will, as the oxen were worn out and many had already died from the bites of a poisonous fly which is called the tsetse. So we lotted out the land, of which there is enough for hundreds, and began to build rude houses.

"Then trouble came upon us. The Kaffirs stole most of our horses, although they have not dared to attack us, and except two belonging to Hernan, the rest died of the sickness, the last of them but yesterday. The oxen, too, have all died of the tsetse bites or other illnesses. But the worst is that although this country looks so healthy, it is poisoned with fever, which comes up, I think, in the mists from the river. Already out of the thirty-five of us, ten are dead, two men, three women, and five children, while more are sick. As yet my father and I and my cousin Pereira have, by God's mercy, kept quite well; but

although we are all very strong, how long this will continue I cannot tell. Fortunately we have plenty of ammunition and the place is thick with game, so that those of the men who remain strong can kill all the food we want, even shooting on foot, and we women have made a great quantity of biltong by salting flesh and drying it in the sun. So we shall not actually starve for a long while, even if the game goes away.

"But, dear Allan, unless help comes to us I think that we shall die every one, for God alone knows the miseries that we suffer and the horrible sights of sickness and death that are around us. At this moment there lies by me a little girl who is dying of fever.

"Oh, Allan, if you can help us, do so! Because of our sick it is impossible for us to get to Delagoa Bay, and if we did we have no money to buy anything there, for all that we had with us was lost in a wagon in a flooded river. It was a great sum, for it included Hernan's rich fortune which he brought from the Cape with him in gold. Nor can we move anywhere else, for we have no cattle or horses. We have sent to Delagoa Bay, where we hear these are to be had, to try to buy them on credit; but my cousin Hernan's relations, of whom he used to talk so much, are dead or gone away, and no one will trust us. With the neighbouring Kaffirs, too, who have plenty of cattle, we have quarrelled since, unfortunately, my cousin and some of the other Boers tried to take certain beasts of theirs without payment. So we are quite helpless, and can only wait for death.

"Allan, my father says that he asked your father to collect some monies that were owing to him. If it were possible for you or other friends to come to Delagoa in a ship with that money, I think that it might serve to buy some oxen, enough for a few wagons. Then perhaps we might trek back and fall in with a party of Boers who, we believe, have crossed the Quathlamba Mountains into Natal. Or perhaps we might get to the Bay and find a ship to take us anywhere from this horrible place. If you could come, the natives would guide you to where we are.

"But it is too much to hope that you will come, or that if you do come you will find us still alive.

"Allan, my dearest, I have one more thing to say, though I must say it shortly, for the paper is nearly finished. I do not know, supposing that you are alive and well, whether you still care for me, who left you so long ago--it seems years and years--but my heart is where it was, and where I promised it should remain, in your keeping. Of course, Hernan has pressed me to marry him, and my father has wished it. But I have always said no, and now, in our wretchedness, there is no more talk of marriage at present, which is the one good thing that has happened to me. And, Allan, before so very long I shall be of age, if I live. Still I dare say you no longer think of marriage with me, who, perhaps, are already married to someone else, especially as now I and all of us are no better than wandering beggars. Yet I have thought it right to tell you these things, which you may like to know.

"Oh, why did God ever put it into my father's heart to leave the Cape Colony just because he hated the British Government and Hernan Pereira and others persuaded him? I know not, but, poor man, he is sorry enough now. It is pitiful to see him; at times I think that he is going mad.

"The paper is done, and the messenger is going; also the sick child is dying and I must attend to her. Will this letter ever come to your hands, I wonder? I am sending with it the little money I have to pay for its delivery--about four pounds English. If not, there is an end. If it does, and you cannot come or send others, at least pray for us. I dream of you by night and think of you by day, for how much I love you I cannot tell.

"In life or death I am

"Your MARIE."

Such was this awful letter. I still have it; it lies before me, those ragged sheets of paper covered with faint pencil-writing that is blotted here and there with tear marks, some of them the tears of Marie who wrote, some of them the tears of me who read. I wonder if there exists a more piteous memorial of the terrible sufferings of the trek-Boers, and especially of such of them as forced their way into the poisonous veld around Delagoa, as did this Marais expedition and those under the command of Triechard. Better, like many of their people, to have

perished at once by the spears of Umzilikazi and other savages than to endure these lingering tortures of fever and starvation.

As I finished reading this letter my father, who had been out visiting some of his Mission Kaffirs, entered the house, and I went into the sitting-room to meet him.

"Why, Allan, what is the matter with you?" he asked, noting my tear-stained face.

I gave him the letter, for I could not speak, and with difficulty he deciphered it.

"Merciful God, what dreadful news!" he said when he had finished. "Those poor people! those poor, misguided people! What can be done for them?"

"I know one thing that can be done, father, or at any rate can be attempted. I can try to reach them."

"Are you mad?" he asked. "How is it possible for you, one man, to get to Delagoa Bay, buy cattle, and rescue these folk, who probably are now all dead?"

"The first two things are possible enough, father. Some ship will take me to the Bay. You have Marais's money, and I have that five hundred pounds which my old aunt in England left me last year. Thank Heaven!

owing to my absence on commando, it still lies untouched in the bank at Port Elizabeth. That is about eight hundred pounds in all, which would buy a great many cattle and other things. As for the third, it is not in our hands, is it? It may be that they cannot be rescued, it may be that they are dead. I can only go to see."

"But, Allan, Allan, you are my only son, and if you go it is probable that I shall never see you more."

"I have been through more dangers lately, father, and am still alive and well. Moreover, if Marie is dead"--I paused, then went on passionately--"Do not try to stop me, for I tell you, father, I will not be stopped. Think of the words in that letter and what a shameless hound I should be if I sat here quiet while Marie is dying yonder. Would you have done so if Marie had been my mother?"

"No," answered the old gentleman, "I should not. Go, and God be with you, Allan, and me also, for I never expect to see you again." And he turned his head aside for a while.

Then we went into matters. The smous was summoned and asked about the ship which brought the letter from Delagoa. It seemed that she was an English-owned brig known as the Seven Stars, and that her captain, one Richardson, proposed to sail back to the Bay on the morrow, that was the third of July, or in other words, within twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours! And Port Elizabeth was one hundred and eighteen miles away, and the Seven Stars might leave earlier if she had completed her cargo and wind and weather served. Moreover, if she did leave, it might be weeks or months before any other ship sailed for Delagoa Bay, for in those days, of course, there were no mail boats.

I looked at my watch. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and from a calendar we had, which gave the tides at Port Elizabeth and other South African harbours, it did not seem probable that the Seven Stars would sail, if she kept to her date, before about eight on the morrow. One hundred and twenty miles to be covered in, say, fourteen hours over rough country with some hills! Well, on the other hand, the roads were fairly good and dry, with no flooded rivers to cross, although there might be one to swim, and there was a full moon. It could be done--barely, and now I was glad indeed that Hernan Pereira had not won my swift mare in that shooting match.

I called to Hans, who was loafing about outside, and said quietly:

"I ride to Port Elizabeth, and must be there by eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Allemachte!" exclaimed Hans, who had been that road several times.

"You will go with me, and from Port Elizabeth on to Delagoa Bay. Saddle the mare and the roan horse, and put a headstall on the chestnut to lead

with you as a spare. Give them all a feed, but no water. We start in half an hour." Then I added certain directions as to the guns we would take, saddle-bags, clothes, blankets and other details, and bade him start about the business.

Hans never hesitated. He had been with me through my recent campaign, and was accustomed to sudden orders. Moreover, I think that if I had told him I was riding to the moon, beyond his customary exclamation of "Allemachte!" he would have made no objection to accompanying me thither.

The next half-hour was a busy time for me. Henri Marais's money had to be got out of the strong box and arranged in a belt of buck's hide that I had strapped about me. A letter had to be written by my father to the manager of the Port Elizabeth bank, identifying me as the owner of the sum lodged there in my name. A meal must be eaten and some food prepared for us to carry. The horses' shoes had to be seen to, and a few clothes packed in the saddle-bags. Also there were other things which I have forgotten. Yet within five-and-thirty minutes the long, lean mare stood before the door. Behind her, with a tall crane's feather in his hat, was Hans, mounted on the roan stallion, and leading the chestnut, a four-year-old which I had bought as a foal on the mare as part of the bargain. Having been corn fed from a colt it was a very sound and well-grown horse, though not the equal of its mother in speed.

In the passage my poor old father, who was quite bewildered by the

rapidity and urgent nature of this business, embraced me.

"God bless you, my dear boy," he said. "I have had little time to think, but I pray that this may be all for the best, and that we may meet again in the world. But if not, remember what I have taught you, and if I survive you, for my part I shall remember that you died trying to do your duty. Oh, what trouble has the blind madness of Henri Marais brought upon us all! Well, I warned him that it would be so. Good-bye, my dear boy, good-bye: my prayers will follow you, and for the rest--Well, I am old, and what does it matter if my grey hairs come with sorrow to the grave?"

I kissed him back, and with an aching heart sprang to the saddle. In five more minutes the station was out of sight.

Thirteen and a half hours later I pulled rein upon the quay of Port Elizabeth just, only just, in time to catch Captain Richardson as he was entering his boat to row out to the Seven Stars, on which the canvas was already being hoisted. As well as I could in my exhausted state, I explained matters and persuaded him to wait till the next tide. Then, thanking God for the mare's speed--the roan had been left foundered thirty miles away, and Hans was following on the chestnut, but not yet up--I dragged the poor beast to an inn at hand. There she lay down and died. Well, she had done her work, and there was no other horse in the country that could have caught that boat.

An hour or so later Hans came in flogging the chestnut, and here I may add that both it and the roan recovered. Indeed I rode them for many years, until they were quite old. When I had eaten, or tried to eat something and rested awhile, I went to the bank, succeeded in explaining the state of the case to the manager, and after some difficulty, for gold was not very plentiful in Port Elizabeth, procured three hundred pounds in sovereigns. For the other two he gave me a bill upon some agent in Delagoa Bay, together with a letter of recommendation to him and the Portuguese governor, who, it appeared, was in debt to their establishment. By an afterthought, however, although I kept the letters, I returned him the bill and spent the £200 in purchasing a great variety of goods which I will not enumerate, that I knew would be useful for trading purposes among the east coast Kaffirs. Indeed, I practically cleared out the Port Elizabeth stores, and barely had time, with the help of Hans and the storekeepers, to pack and ship the goods before the Seven Stars put out to sea.

Within twenty-four hours from the time I had left the Mission Station, Hans and I saw behind us Port Elizabeth fading into the distance, and in front a waste of stormy waters.

CHAPTER VIII. THE CAMP OF DEATH