

CHAPTER XV. RETIEF ASKS A FAVOUR

Now and again during our troubled journey through life we reach little oases of almost perfect happiness, set jewel-like here and there in the thorny wilderness of time. Sometimes these are hours of mere animal content. In others they are made beautiful by waters blowing from our spiritual springs of being, as in those rare instances when the material veil of life seems to be rent by a mighty hand, and we feel the presence and the comfort of God within us and about us, guiding our footsteps to the ineffable end, which is Himself. Occasionally, however, all these, physical satisfaction and love divine and human, are blended to a whole, like soul and body, and we can say, "Now I know what is joy."

Such an hour came to me on the evening of that day of the winning of my bet with Dingaan, when a dozen lives or so were set against my nerve and skill. These had not failed me, although I knew that had it not been for the inspiration of the Hottentot Hans (who sent it, I wonder?) they would have been of no service at all. With all my thought and experience, it had never occurred to me that the wonderful eyes of the vultures would see the flash of the powder even through the pervading sunlight, and swerve before the deadly bullet could reach them.

On that night I was indeed a hero in a small way. Even Henri Marais thawed and spoke to me as a father might to his child, he who always disliked me in secret, partly because I was an Englishman, partly

because I was everything to his daughter and he was jealous, and partly for the reason that I stood in the path of his nephew, Hernan Pereira, whom he either loved or feared, or both. As for the rest of them, men, women and children, they thanked and blessed me with tears in their eyes, vowing that, young as I was, thenceforth I and no other should be their leader. As may be imagined, although it is true that she set down my success to her meal of bullock's liver and the nap which she had insisted on my taking, the Vrouw Prinsloo was the most enthusiastic of them all.

"Look at him," she said, pointing with her fat finger at my insignificant self and addressing her family. "If only I had such a husband or a son, instead of you lumps that God has tied to me like clogs to the heels of a she-ass, I should be happy."

"God did that in order to prevent you from kicking, old vrouw," said her husband, a quiet man with a vein of sardonic humour. "If only He had tied another clog to your tongue, I should be happy also"; whereon the vrouw smacked his head and her children got out of the way sniggering.

But the most blessed thing of all was my interview with Marie. All that took place between us can best be left to the imagination, since the talk of lovers, even in such circumstances, is not interesting to others. Also, in a sense, it is too sacred to repeat. One sentence I will set down, however, because in the light of after events I feel that it was prophetic, and not spoken merely by chance. It was at the end of

our talk, as she was handing me back the pistol that I had given her for a certain dreadful purpose.

"Three times you have saved my life, Allan--once at Maraisfontein, once from starvation, and now from Dingaan, whose touch would have meant my death. I wonder whether it will ever be my turn to save yours?"

She looked down for a little while, then lifted her head and laid her hand upon my shoulder, adding slowly: "Do you know, Allan, I think that it will at the--" and suddenly she turned and left me with her sentence unfinished.

So thus it came about that by the help of Providence I was enabled to rescue all these worthy folk from a miserable and a bloody death. And yet I have often reflected since that if things had gone differently; if, for instance, that king aasvogel had found strength to carry itself away to die at a distance instead of soaring straight upwards like a towering partridge, as birds injured in the lungs will often do--I suppose in search of air--it might have been better in the end. Then I should certainly have shot Dingaan dead and every one of us would as certainly have been killed on the spot. But if Dingaan had died that day, Retief and his companions would never have been massacred. Also as the peaceful Panda, his brother, would, I suppose, have succeeded to the throne, probably the subsequent slaughter at Weenen, and all the after fighting, would never have taken place. But so it was fated, and who

am I that I should quarrel with or even question the decrees of fate? Doubtless these things were doomed to happen, and they happened in due course. There is nothing more to be said.

Early on the following morning we collected our oxen, which, although still footsore, were now full fed and somewhat rested. An hour or two later began our trek, word having come to us from Dingaan that we must start at once. Also he sent us guides, under the command of the captain Kambula, to show us the road to Natal.

I breakfasted that day with the Reverend Mr. Owen and his people, my object being to persuade him to come away with us, as I did not consider that Zululand was a safe place for white women and children. My mission proved fruitless. Mrs. Hulley, the wife of the absent interpreter, who had three little ones, Miss Owen and the servant, Jane Williams, were all of them anxious enough to do as I suggested. But Mr. and Mrs. Owen, who were filled with the true fervour of missionaries, would not listen. They said that God would protect them; that they had only been a few weeks in the country, and that it would be the act of cowards and of traitors to fly at the very beginning of their work. Here I may add that after the massacre of Retief they changed their opinion, small blame to them, and fled as fast as anyone else.

I told Mr. Owen how very close I had gone to shooting Dingaan, in which event they might all have been killed with us. This news shocked him much. Indeed, he lectured me severely on the sins of bloodthirstiness

and a desire for revenge. So, finding that we looked at things differently, and that it was of no use wasting breath in argument, I wished him and his people good-bye and good fortune and went upon my way, little guessing how we should meet again.

An hour later we trekked. Passing by the accursed hill, Hloma Amabutu, where I saw some gorged vultures sleeping on the rocks, we came to the gate of the Great Kraal. Here, to my surprise, I saw Dingaan with some of his councillors and an armed guard of over a hundred men, seated under the shade of two big milk trees. Fearing treachery, I halted the wagons and advised the Boers to load their rifles and be ready for the worst. A minute or so later young Thomas Halstead arrived and told me that Dingaan wished to speak with us. I asked him if that meant that we were to be killed. He answered, "No, you are quite safe." The king had received some news that had put him in a good humour with the white people, and he desired to bid us farewell, that was all.

So we trekked boldly to where Dingaan was, and, stopping the wagons, went up to him in a body. He greeted us kindly enough, and even gave me his fat hand to shake.

"Macumazahn," he said, "although it has cost me many oxen, I am glad that your magic prevailed yesterday. Had it not done so I should have killed all these your friends, which would have been a cause of war between me and the Amaboona. Now, this morning I have learned that these Amaboona are sending a friendly embassy to me under one of their great

chiefs, and I think that you will meet them on the road. I charge you, therefore, to tell them to come on, having no fear, as I will receive them well and listen to all they have to say."

I answered that I would do so.

"Good," he replied. "I am sending twelve head of cattle with you, six of them for your food during your journey, and six as a present to the embassy of the Amaboona. Also Kambula, my captain, has charge to see you safely over the Tugela River."

I thanked him and turned to go, when suddenly his eye fell upon Marie, who, foolishly enough, took this opportunity to advance from among the others and speak to me about something--I forget what.

"Macumazahn, is that the maiden of whom you spoke to me?" asked Dingaan; "she whom you are going to marry?"

I answered, "Yes."

"By the head of the Black One," he exclaimed, "she is very fair. Will you not make a present of her to me, Macumazahn?"

I answered, "No; she is not mine to give away."

"Well, then, Macumazahn, I will pay you a hundred head of cattle for

her, which is the price of a royal wife, and give you ten of the fairest girls in Zululand in exchange."

I answered that it could not be.

Now the king began to grow angry.

"I will keep her, whether you wish it or no," he said.

"Then you will keep her dead, O Dingaan," I replied, "for there is more of that magic which slew the vultures."

Of course, I meant that Marie would be dead. But as my knowledge of the Zulu tongue was imperfect, he understood the words to mean that he would be dead, and I think they frightened him. At any rate, he said:

"Well, I promised you all safe-conduct if you won your bet, so hamba gachlé (go in peace). I wish to have no quarrel with the white folk, but, Macumazahn, you are the first of them who has refused a gift to Dingaan. Still, I bear you no grudge, and if you choose to come back again, you will be welcome, for I perceive that, although so small, you are very clever and have a will of your own; also that you mean what you say and speak the truth. Tell the People of George that my heart is soft towards them." Then he turned and walked away through the gates of the kraal.

Glad enough was I to see the last of him, for now I knew that we were safe, except from such accidents as may overtake any travellers through a wild country. For the present, at any rate until after he had seen this embassy, Dingaan wished to stand well with the Boers. Therefore it was obvious that he would never make an irreparable quarrel with them by treacherously putting us to death as we trekked through his country. Being sure of this, we went on our way with light hearts, thanking Heaven for the mercies which had been shown to us.

It was on the third day of our trek, when we were drawing near to the Tugela, that we met the Boer embassy, off-saddled by a little stream where we proposed to outspan to rest the oxen while we ate our midday meal. They were sleeping in the heat of the day and saw nothing of us till we were right on to them, when, catching sight of our Zulu advance guard, they sprang up and ran for their rifles. Then the wagons emerged from the bush, and they stared astonished, wondering who could be trekking in that country.

We called to them in Dutch not to be afraid and in another minute we were among them. While we were yet some way off my eye fell upon a burly, white-bearded man whose figure seemed to be familiar to me, and towards him I went, taking no heed of the others, of whom there may have been six or seven. Soon I was sure, and advancing with outstretched hand, said:

"Good-day, Mynheer Piet Retief. Who would have thought that we who

parted so far away and so long ago would live to meet among the Zulus?"

He stared at me.

"Who is it? Who is it? Allemachte! I know now. The little Englishman, Allan Quatermain, who shot the geese down in the Old Colony. Well, I should not be surprised, for the man you beat in that match told me that you were travelling in these parts. Only I understood him to say that the Zulus had killed you."

"If you mean Hernan Pereira," I answered, "where did you meet him?"

"Why, down by the Tugela there, in a bad way. However, he can tell you all about that himself, for I have brought him with me to show us the path to Dingaan's kraal. Where is Pereira? Send Pereira here. I want to speak with him."

"Here I am," answered a sleepy voice, the hated voice of Pereira himself, from the other side of a thick bush, where he had been slumbering. "What is it, commandant? I come," and he emerged, stretching himself and yawning, just as the remainder of my party came up. He caught sight of Henri Marais first of all, and began to greet him, saying: "Thank God, my uncle, you are safe!"

Then his eyes fell on me, and I do not think I ever saw a man's face change more completely. His jaw dropped, the colour left his cheeks,

leaving them of the yellow which is common to persons of Portuguese descent; his outstretched hand fell to his side.

"Allan Quatermain!" he ejaculated. "Why, I thought that you were dead."

"As I should have been, Mynheer Pereira, twice over if you could have had your way," I replied.

"What do you mean, Allan?" broke in Retief.

"I will tell you what he means," exclaimed the Vrouw Prinsloo, shaking her fat fist at Pereira. "That yellow dog means that twice he has tried to murder Allan--Allan, who saved his life and ours. Once he shot at him in a kloof and grazed his cheek; look, there is the scar of it. And once he plotted with the Zulus to slaughter him, telling Dingaan that he was an evildoer and a wizard, who would bring a curse upon his land."

Now Retief looked at Pereira.

"What do you say to this?" he asked.

"What do I say?" repeated Pereira, recovering himself. "Why, that it is a lie or a misunderstanding. I never shot at Heer Allan in any kloof. Is it likely that I should have done so when he had just nursed me back to life? I never plotted with the Zulus for his death, which would have meant the deaths of my uncle and my cousin and of all their companions.

Am I mad that I should do such a thing?"

"Not mad, but bad," screamed the vrouw. "I tell you, Heer Retief, it is no lie. Ask those with me," she added, appealing to the others, who, with the exception of Marais, answered as with one voice:

"No; it is no lie."

"Silence!" said the commandant. "Now, nephew Allan, tell us your story."

So I told him everything, of course leaving out all details. Even then the tale was long, though it did not seem to be one that wearied my hearers.

"Allemachte!" said Retief when I had finished, "this is a strange story, the strangest that ever I heard. If it is true, Hernan Pereira, you deserve to have your back set against a tree and to be shot."

"God in heaven!" he answered, "am I to be condemned on such a tale--I, an innocent man? Where is the evidence? This Englishman tells all this against me for a simple reason--that he has robbed me of the love of my cousin, to whom I was affianced. Where are his witnesses?"

"As to the shooting at me in the kloof, I have none except God who saw you," I answered. "As to the plot that you laid against me among the Zulus, as it chanced, however, there is one, Kambula, the captain

who was sent to take me as you had arranged, and who now commands our escort."

"A savage!" exclaimed Pereira. "Is the tale of a savage to be taken against that of a white man? Also, who will translate his story? You, Mynheer Quatermain, are the only one here who knows his tongue, if you do know it, and you are my accuser."

"That is true," remarked Retief. "Such a witness should not be admitted without a sworn interpreter. Now listen; I pass judgment as commandant in the field. Hernan Pereira, I have known you to be a rogue in the past, for I remember that you cheated this very young man, Allan Quatermain, at a friendly trial of skill at which I was present; but since then till now I have heard nothing more of you, good or bad. To-day this Allan Quatermain and a number of my own countrymen bring grave charges against you, which, however, at present are not capable of proof or disproof. Well, I cannot decide those charges, whatever my own opinion may be. I think that you had better go back with your uncle, Henri Marais, to the trek-Boers, where they can be laid before a court and settled according to law."

"If so, he will go back alone," said the Vrouw Prinsloo. "He will not go back with us, for we will elect a field-cornet and shoot him--the stinkcat, who left us to starve and afterwards tried to kill little Allan Quatermain, who saved our lives"; and the chorus behind her echoed:

"Ja, ja, we will shoot him."

"Hernan Pereira," said Retief, rubbing his broad forehead, "I don't quite know why it is, but no one seems to want you as a companion. Indeed, to speak truth, I don't myself. Still, I think you would be safer with me than with these others whom you seem to have offended. Therefore, I suggest that you come on with us. But listen here, man," he added sternly, "if I find you plotting against us among the Zulus, that hour you are dead. Do you understand?"

"I understand that I am one slandered," replied Pereira. "Still, it is Christian to submit to injuries, and therefore I will do as you wish. As to these bearers of false witness, I leave them to God."

"And I leave you to the devil," shouted Vrouw Prinsloo, "who will certainly have you soon or late. Get out of my sight, stinkcat, or I will pull your hair off." And she rushed at him, flapping her dreadful vatdoek--which she produced from some recess in her raiment--in his face, driving him away as though he were a noxious insect.

Well, he went I know not where, and so strong was public opinion against him that I do not think that even his uncle, Henri Marais, sought him out to console him.

When Pereira was gone, our party and that of Retief fell into talk, and

we had much to tell. Especially was the commandant interested in the story of my bet with Dingaam, whereby I saved the lives of all my companions by shooting the vultures.

"It was not for nothing, nephew, that God Almighty gave you the power of holding a gun so straight," said Retief to me when he understood the matter. "I remember that when you killed those wildfowl in the Groote Kloof with bullets, which no other man could have done, I wondered why you should have such a gift above all the rest of us, who have practised for so many more years. Well, now I understand. God Almighty is no fool; He knows His business. I wish you were coming back with me to Dingaam; but as that tainted man, Hernan Pereira, is of my company, perhaps it is better that you should stay away. Tell me, now, about this Dingaam; does he mean to kill us?"

"Not this time, I think, uncle," I answered; "because first he wishes to learn all about the Boers. Still, do not trust him too far just because he speaks you softly. Remember, that if I had missed the third vulture, we should all have been dead by now. And, if you are wise, keep an eye upon Hernan Pereira."

"These things I will do, nephew, especially the last of them; and now we must be getting on. Stay; come here, Henri Marais; I have a word to say to you. I understand that this little Englishman, Allan Quatermain, who is worth ten bigger men, loves your daughter, whose life he has saved again and again, and that she loves him. Why, then, do you not let them

marry in a decent fashion?"

"Because before God I have sworn her to another man--to my nephew, Hernan Pereira, whom everyone slanders," answered Marais sulkily. "Until she is of age that oath holds."

"Oho!" said Retief, "you have sworn your lamb to that hyena, have you? Well, look out that he does not crack your bones as well as hers, and perhaps some others also. Why does God give some men a worm in their brains, as He does to the wildebeeste, a worm that always makes them run the wrong way? I don't know, I am sure; but you who are very religious, Henri Marais, might think the matter over and tell me the answer when next we meet. Well, this girl of yours will soon be of age, and then, as I am commandant down yonder where she is going, I'll see she marries the man she wants, whatever you say, Henri Marais. Heaven above us! I only wish it were my daughter he was in love with. A fellow who can shoot to such good purpose might have the lot of them"; and uttering one of his great, hearty laughs, he walked off to his horse.

On the morrow of this meeting we forded the Tugela and entered the territory that is now called Natal. Two days' short trekking through a beautiful country brought us to some hills that I think were called Pakadi, or else a chief named Pakadi lived there, I forget which. Crossing these hills, on the further side of them, as Retief had told us we should do, we found a large party of the trek-Boers, who were already

occupying this land on the hither side of the Bushman's River, little knowing, poor people, that it was fated to become the grave of many of them. To-day, and for all future time, that district is and will be known by the name of Weenen, or the Place of Weeping, because of those pioneers who here were massacred by Dingaan within a few weeks of the time of which I write.

Nice as the land was, for some reason or other it did not quite suit my fancy, and therefore, in view of my approaching marriage with Marie, having purchased a horse from one of the trek-Boers, I began to explore the country round. My object was to find a stretch of fertile veld where we could settle when we were wedded, and such a spot I discovered after some trouble. It lay about thirty miles away to the east, in the loop of a beautiful stream that is now known as the Mooi River.

Enclosed in this loop were some thirty thousand acres of very rich, low-lying soil, almost treeless and clothed with luxuriant grasses where game was extraordinarily numerous. At the head of it rose a flat-topped hill, from the crest of which, oddly enough, flowed a plentiful stream of water fed by a strong spring. Half-way down this hill, facing to the east, and irrigable by the stream, was a plateau several acres in extent, which furnished about the best site for a house that I know in all South Africa. Here I determined we would build our dwelling-place and become rich by the breeding up of great herds of cattle. I should explain that this ground, which once, as the remains of their old kraals showed, had belonged to a Kaffir tribe killed out by Chaka, the Zulu

king, was to be had for the taking.

Indeed, as there was more land than we could possibly occupy, I persuaded Henri Marais, the Prinsloos and the Meyers, with whom I had trekked from Delagoa, to visit it with me. When they had seen it they agreed to make it their home in the future, but meanwhile elected to return to the other Boers for safety's sake. So with the help of some Kaffirs, of whom there were a few in the district, remnants of those tribes which Chaka had destroyed, I pegged out an estate of about twelve thousand acres for myself, and, selecting a site, set the natives to work to build a rough mud house upon it which would serve as a temporary dwelling. I should add that the Prinsloos and the Meyers also made arrangements for the building of similar shelters almost alongside of my own. This done, I returned to Marie and the trek-Boers.

On the morning after my return to the camp Piet Retief appeared there with his five or six companions. I asked him how he had got on with Dingaan.

"Well enough, nephew," he answered. "At first the king was somewhat angry, saying that we Boers had stolen six hundred head of his cattle. But I showed him that it was the chief, Sikonyela, who lives yonder on the Caledon River, who had dressed up his people in white men's clothes and put them upon horses, and afterwards drove the cattle through one of our camps to make it appear that we were the thieves. Then he asked me what was my object in visiting him. I answered that I sought a grant of

the land south of the Tugela to the sea.

"Bring me back the cattle that you say Sikonyela has stolen,' he said, 'and we will talk about this land.' To this I agreed and soon after left the kraal."

"What did you do with Hernan Pereira, uncle?" I asked.

"This, Allan. When I was at Umgungundhlovu I sought out the truth of that story you told me as to his having made a plot to get you killed by the Zulus on the ground that you were a wizard."

"And what did you discover, uncle?"

"I discovered that it was true, for Dingaan told me so himself. Then I sent for Pereira and ordered him out of my camp, telling him that if he came back among the Boers I would have him put on his trial for attempted murder. He said nothing, but went away."

"Whither did he go?"

"To a place that Dingaan gave him just outside his kraal. The king said that he would be useful to him, as he could mend guns and teach his soldiers to shoot with them. So there, I suppose, he remains, unless he has thought it wiser to make off. At any rate, I am sure that he will not come here to trouble you or anyone."

"No, uncle, but he may trouble you there," I said doubtfully.

"What do you mean, Allan?"

"I don't quite know, but he is black-hearted, a traitor by nature, and in one way or the other he will stir up sorrow. Do you think that he will love you, for instance, after you have hunted him out like a thief?"

Retief shrugged his shoulders and laughed as he answered:

"I will take my chance of that. What is the use of troubling one's head about such a snake of a man? And now, Allan, I have something to ask you. Are you married yet?"

"No, uncle, nor can be for another five weeks, when Marie comes of age. Her father still holds that his oath binds him, and I have promised that I will not take her till then."

"Does he indeed, Allan? I think that Henri Marais is 'kransick' (that is, cracked), or else his cursed nephew, Hernan, has fascinated him, as a snake does a bird. Still, I suppose that he has the law on his side, and, as I am commandant, I cannot advise anyone to break the law. Now listen. It is no use your staying here looking at the ripe peach you may not pluck, for that only makes the stomach sick. Therefore the

best thing that you can do is to come with me to get those cattle from Sikonyela, for I shall be very glad of your company. Afterwards, too, I want you to return with me to Zululand when I go for the grant of all this country."

"But how about my getting married?" I asked in dismay.

"Oh! I dare say you will be able to marry before we start. Or if not, it must be when we return. Listen now; do not disappoint me in this matter, Allan. None of us can speak Zulu except you, who takes to these savage languages like a duck to water, and I want you to be my interpreter with Dingaan. Also the king specially asked that you should come with me when I brought the cattle, as he seems to have taken a great fancy to you. He said that you would render his words honestly, but that he did not trust the lad whom he has there to translate into Dutch and English. So you see it will help me very much in this big business if you come with me."

Still I hesitated, for some fear of the future lay heavy on my heart, warning me against this expedition.

"Allemachte!" said Retief angrily, "if you will not grant me a favour, let it be. Or is it that you want reward? If so, all I can promise you is twenty thousand acres of the best land in the country when we get it."

"No, Mynheer Retief," I replied; "it is no question of reward; and as

for the land, I have already pegged out my farm on a river about thirty miles to the east. It is that I do not like to leave Marie alone, fearing lest her father should play some trick on me as regards her and Hernan Pereira."

"Oh, if that is all you are afraid of, Allan, I can soon settle matters; for I will give orders to the *prédicant* Celliers that he is not to marry Marie Marais to anyone except yourself, even if she asks him. Also I will order that if Hernan Pereira should come to the camp, he is to be shut up until I return to try him. Lastly, as commandant, I will name Henri Marais as one of those who are to accompany us, so that he will be able to plot nothing against you. Now are you satisfied?"

I said "Yes" as cheerfully as I could, though I felt anything but cheerful, and we parted, for, of course, the Commandant Retief had much to occupy him.

Then I went and told Marie what I had promised. Somewhat to my surprise she said that she thought I had acted wisely.

"If you stayed here," she added, "perhaps some new quarrel would arise between you and my father which might make bitterness afterwards. Also, dear, it would be foolish for you to offend the Commandant Retief, who will be the great man in this country, and who is very fond of you. After all, Allan, we shall only be separated for a little while, and when that is done we have the rest of our lives to spend together. As

for me, do not be afraid, for you know I will never marry anyone but you--no, not to save myself from death."

So I left her somewhat comforted, knowing how sound was her judgment, and went off to make my preparations for the expedition to Sikonyela's country.

All this conversation with Retief I have set down in full, as nearly as I can remember it, because of its fateful consequences. Ah! if I could have foreseen; if only I could have foreseen!