

CHAPTER XVI. THE COUNCIL

Two days later we started to recover Dingaan's cattle, sixty or seventy of us, all well armed and mounted. With us went two of Dingaan's captains and a number of Zulus, perhaps a hundred, who were to drive the cattle if we recovered them. As I could speak their language I was more or less in command of this Zulu contingent, and managed to make myself very useful in that capacity. Also, during the month or so of our absence, by continually conversing with them, I perfected myself considerably in my knowledge of their beautiful but difficult tongue.

Now it is not my intention to write down the details of this expedition, during which there was no fighting and nothing serious happened. We arrived in due course at Sikonyela's and stated our errand. When he saw how numerous and well armed we were, and that behind us was all the might of the Zulu army, that wily old rascal thought it well to surrender the stolen cattle without further to-do, and with these some horses which he had lifted from the Boers. So, having received them, we delivered them over to the Zulu captains, with instructions to drive them carefully to Umgungundhlovu. The commandant sent a message by these men to the effect that, having fulfilled his part of the compact, he would wait upon Dingaan as soon as possible in order to conclude the treaty about the land.

This business finished, Retief took me and a number of the Boers

to visit other bodies of the emigrant Dutch who were beyond the Drakensberg, in what is now the Transvaal territory. This occupied a long time, as these Boers were widely scattered, and at each camp we had to stop for several days while Retief explained everything to its leaders. Also he arranged with them to come down into Natal, so as to be ready to people it as soon as he received the formal cession of the country from Dingaan. Indeed, most of them began to trek at once, although jealousies between the various commandants caused some of the bands, luckily for themselves, to remain on the farther side of the mountains.

At length, everything being settled, we rode away, and reached the Bushman's River camp on a certain Saturday afternoon. Here, to my joy, we found all well. Nothing had been heard of Hernan Pereira, while the Zulus, if we might judge from messengers who came to us, seemed to be friendly. Marie, also, had now quite recovered from the fears and hardships which she had undergone. Never had I seen her look so sweet and beautiful as she did when she greeted me, arrayed no longer in rags, but in a simple yet charming dress made of some stuff that she had managed to buy from a trader who came up to the camp from Durban. Moreover, I think that there was another reason for the change, since the light of dawning happiness shone in her deep eyes.

The day, as I have said, was Saturday, and on the Monday she would come of age and be free to dispose of herself in marriage, for on that day lapsed the promise which we had given to her father. But, alas! by a

cursed perversity of fate, on this very Monday at noon the Commandant Retief had arranged to ride into Zululand on his second visit to Dingaan, and with Retief I was in honour bound to go.

"Marie," I said, "will not your father soften towards us and let us be married to-morrow, so that we may have a few hours together before we part?"

"I do not know, my dear," she answered, blushing, "since about this matter he is very strange and obstinate. Do you know that all the time you were absent he never mentioned your name, and if anyone else spoke it he would get up and go away!"

"That's bad," I said. "Still, if you are willing, we might try."

"Indeed and indeed, Allan, I am willing, who am sick of being so near to you and yet so far. But how shall we do so?"

"I think that we will ask the Commandant Retief and the Vrouw Prinsloo to plead for us, Marie. Let us go to seek them."

She nodded, and hand in hand we walked through the Boers, who nudged each other and laughed at us as we passed to where the old vrouw was seated on a stool by her wagon drinking coffee. I remember that her vatdoek was spread over her knees, for she also had a new dress, which she was afraid of staining.

"Well, my dears," she said in her loud voice, "are you married already that you hang so close together?"

"No, my aunt," I answered; "but we want to be, and have come to you to help us."

"That I will do with all my heart, though to speak truth, young people, at your age, as things are, I should have been inclined to help myself, as I have told you before. Heaven above us! what is it that makes marriage in the sight of God? It is that male and female should declare themselves man and wife before all folk, and live as such. The pastor and his mumblings are very well if you can get them, but it is the giving of the hand, not the setting of the ring upon it; it is the vowing of two true hearts, and not words read out of a book, that make marriage. Still, this is bold talk, for which any reverend prédicant would reprove me, for if young folk acted on it, although the tie might hold good in law, what would become of his fee? Come, let us seek the commandant and hear what he has to say. Allan, pull me up off this stool, where, if I had my way, after so much travelling, I should like to sit while a house was built over my head and for the rest of my life."

I obeyed, not without difficulty, and we went to find Retief.

At the moment he was standing alone, watching two wagons that had just

trekked away. These contained his wife with other members of his family, and some friends whom he was sending, under the charge of the Heer Smit, to a place called Doornkop, that lay at a distance of fifteen miles or more. At this Doornkop he had already caused a rough house, or rather shed, to be built for the Vrouw Retief's occupation, thinking that she would be more comfortable and perhaps safer there during his absence than at the crowded camp in a wagon.

"Allemachte! Allan," he said, catching sight of me, "my heart is sore; I do not know why. I tell you that when I kissed my old woman good-bye just now I felt as though I should never see her again, and the tears came into my eyes. I wish we were all safe back from Dingaen. But there, there, I will try to get over to see her to-morrow, as we don't start till Monday. What is it that you want, Allan, with that 'mooi mesje' of yours?"--and he pointed to the tall Marie.

"What would any man want with such a one, save to marry her?" broke in the Vrouw Prinsloo. "Now, commandant, listen while I set out the tale."

"All right, aunt, only be brief, for I have no time to spare."

She obeyed, but I cannot say that she was brief.

When at last the old lady paused, breathless, Retief said:

"I understand everything; there is no need for you young people to

talk. Now we will go and see Henri Marais, and, if he is not madder than usual, make him listen to reason."

So we walked to where Marais's wagon stood at the end of the line, and found him sitting on the disselboom cutting up tobacco with his pocket-knife.

"Good-day, Allan," he said, for we had not met since my return. "Have you had a nice journey?"

I was about to answer when the commandant broke in impatiently:

"See here, see here, Henri, we have not come to talk about Allan's journey, but about his marriage, which is more important. He rides with me to Zululand on Monday, as you do, and wants to wed your daughter to-morrow, which is Sunday, a good day for the deed."

"It is a day to pray, not to give and be given in marriage," commented Marais sulkily. "Moreover, Marie does not come of age before Monday, and until then the oath that I made to God holds."

"My vatdoek for your oath!" exclaimed the vrouw, flapping that awful rag in his face. "How much do you suppose that God cares what you in your folly swore to that stinkcat of a nephew of yours? Do you be careful, Henri Marais, that God does not make of your precious oath a stone to fall upon your head and break it like a peanut-shell."

"Hold your chattering tongue, old woman," said Marais furiously. "Am I to be taught my duty to my conscience and my daughter by you?"

"Certainly you are, if you cannot teach them to yourself," began the vrouw, setting her hands upon her hips.

But Retief pushed her aside, saying:

"No quarrelling here. Now, Henri Marais, your conduct about these two young people who love each other is a scandal. Will you let them be married to-morrow or not?"

"No, commandant, I will not. By the law I have power over my daughter till she is of age, and I refuse to allow her to marry a cursed Englishman. Moreover, the prédicant Celliers is away, so there is none to marry them."

"You speak strange words, Mynheer Marais," said Retief quietly, "especially when I remember all that this 'cursed Englishman' has done for you and yours, for I have heard every bit of that story, though not from him. Now hearken. You have appealed to the law, and, as commandant, I must allow your appeal. But after twelve o'clock to-morrow night, according to your own showing, the law ceases to bind your daughter. Therefore, on Monday morning, if there is no clergyman in the camp and these two wish it, I, as commandant, will marry them before all men, as

I have the power to do."

Then Marais broke into one of those raving fits of temper which were constitutional in him, and to my mind showed that he was never quite sane. Oddly enough, it was on poor Marie that he concentrated his wrath. He cursed her horribly because she had withstood his will and refused to marry Hernan Pereira. He prayed that evil might fall on her; that she might never bear a child, and that if she did, it might die, and other things too unpleasant to mention.

We stared at him astonished, though I think that had he been any other man than the father of my betrothed, I should have struck him. Retief, I noticed, lifted his hand to do so, then let it fall again, muttering: "Let be; he is possessed with a devil."

At last Marais ceased, not, I think, from lack of words, but because he was exhausted, and stood before us, his tall form quivering, and his thin, nervous face working like that of a person in convulsions. Then Marie, who had dropped her head beneath this storm, lifted it, and I saw that her deep eyes were all ablaze and that she was very white.

"You are my father," she said in a low voice, "and therefore I must submit to whatever you choose to say to me. Moreover, I think it likely that the evil which you call down will fall upon me, since Satan is always at hand to fulfil his own wishes. But if so, my father, I am sure that this evil will recoil upon your own head, not only here, but

hereafter. There justice will be done to both of us, perhaps before very long, and also to your nephew, Hernan Pereira."

Marais made no answer; his rage seemed to have spent itself. He only sat himself again upon the disselboom of the wagon and went on cutting up the tobacco viciously, as though he were slicing the heart of a foe.

Even the Vrouw Prinsloo was silent and stared at him whilst she fanned herself with the vatdoek. But Retief spoke.

"I wonder if you are mad, or only wicked, Henri Marais," he said. "To curse your own sweet girl like this you must be one or the other--a single child who has always been good to you. Well, as you are to ride with me on Monday, I pray that you will keep your temper under control, lest it should bring us into trouble, and you also. As for you, Marie, my dear, do not fret because a wild beast has tried to toss you with his horns, although he happens to be your father. On Monday morning you pass out of his power into your own, and on that day I will marry you to Allan Quatermain here. Meanwhile, I think you are safest away from this father of yours, who might take to cutting your throat instead of that tobacco. Vrouw Prinsloo, be so good as to look after Marie Marais, and on Monday morning next bring her before me to be wed. Until then, Henri Marais, I, as commandant, shall set a guard over you, with orders to seize you if it should be necessary. Now I advise you to take a walk, and when you are calm again, to pray God to forgive you your wicked words, lest they should be fulfilled and drag you down to judgment."

Then we all went, leaving Henri Marais still cutting up his tobacco on the disselboom.

On the Sunday I met Marais walking about the camp, followed by the guard whom Retief had set over him. To my surprise he greeted me almost with affection.

"Allan," he said, "you must not misunderstand me. I do not really wish ill to Marie, whom I love more dearly than I do my life; God alone knows how much I love her. But I made a promise to her cousin, Hernan, my only sister's only child, and you will understand that I cannot break that promise, although Hernan has disappointed me in many ways--yes, in many ways. But if he is bad, as they say, it comes with that Portuguese blood, which is a misfortune that he cannot help, does it not? However bad he may be, as an honest man I am bound to keep my promise, am I not? Also, Allan, you must remember that you are English, and although you may be a good fellow in yourself, that is a fault which you cannot expect me to forgive. Still, if it is fated that you should marry my daughter and breed English children--Heaven above! to think of it, English children!--well, there is nothing more to be said. Don't remember the words I spoke to Marie. Indeed, I can't remember them myself. When I grow angry, a kind of rush of blood comes into my brain, and then I forget what I have said," and he stretched out his hand to me.

I shook it and answered that I understood he was not himself when he

spoke those dreadful words, which both Marie and I wished to forget.

"I hope you will come to our wedding to-morrow," I added, "and wipe them out with a father's blessing."

"To-morrow! Are you really going to be married to-morrow?" he exclaimed, his sallow face twitching nervously. "O God, it was another man that I dreamed to see standing by Marie's side. But he is not here; he has disgraced and deserted me. Well, I will come, if my gaolers will suffer it. Good-bye, you happy bridegroom of to-morrow, good-bye."

Then he swung round and departed, followed by the guards, one of whom touched his brow and shook his head significantly as he passed me.

I think that Sunday seemed the longest day I ever spent. The Vrouw Prinsloo would scarcely allow me even a glimpse of Marie, because of some fad she had got into her mind that it was either not proper or not fortunate, I forget which, that a bride and bridegroom should associate on the eve of their marriage. So I occupied myself as best I could.

First I wrote a long letter to my father, the third that I had sent, telling him everything that was going to happen, and saying how grieved I was that he could not be present to marry us and give us his blessing.

This letter I gave to a trader who was trekking to the bay on the following morning, begging him to forward it by the first opportunity.

That duty done, I saw about the horses which I was taking into Zululand, three of them, two for myself and one for Hans, who accompanied me as after-rider. Also the saddlery, saddle-bags, guns and ammunition must be overhauled, all of which took some time.

"You are going to spend a strange wittebroodsweek [white-bread-week, or, in other words, honeymoon], baas," said Hans, squinting at me with his little eyes, as he brayed away at a buckskin which was to serve as a saddle-cloth. "Now, if I was to be married to-morrow, I should stop with my pretty for a few days, and only ride off somewhere else when I was tired of her, especially if that somewhere else chanced to be Zululand, where they are so fond of killing people."

"I dare say you would, Hans; and so would I, if I could, you be sure. But, you see, the commandant wants me to interpret, and therefore it is my duty to go with him."

"Duty; what is duty, baas? Love I understand. It is for love of you that I go with you; also for fear lest you should cause me to be beaten if I refused. Otherwise I would certainly stop here in the camp, where there is plenty to eat and little work to do, as, were I you, I should do also for love of that white missie. But duty--pah! that is a fool-word, which makes bones of a man before his time and leaves his girl to others."

"Of course, you do not understand, Hans, any more than you coloured people understand what gratitude is. But what do you mean about this

trek of ours? Are you afraid?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "A little, perhaps, baas. At least, I should be if I thought about the morrow, which I don't, since to-day is enough for me, and thinking about what one can't know makes the head ache. Dingaam is not a nice man, baas; we saw that, didn't we? He is a hunter who knows how to set a trap. Also he has the Baas Pereira up there to help him. So perhaps you might be more comfortable here kissing Missie Marie. Why do you not say that you have hurt your leg and cannot run? It would not be much trouble to walk about on a crutch for a day or two, and when the commandant was well gone, your leg might heal and you could throw the stick away."

"Get thee behind me, Satan," I muttered to myself, and was about to give Hans a piece of my mind when I recollected that the poor fellow had his own way of looking at things and could not be blamed. Also, as he said, he loved me, and only suggested what he thought would tend to my joy and safety. How could I suppose that he would be interested in the success of a diplomatic mission to Dingaam, or think anything about it except that it was a risky business? So I only said:

"Hans, if you are afraid, you had better stop behind. I can easily find another after-rider."

"Is the baas angry with me that he should speak so?" asked the Hottentot. "Have I not always been true to him; and if I should be

killed, what does it matter? Have I not said that I do not think about to-morrow, and we must all go to sleep sometime? No; unless the baas beats me back, I shall come with him. But, baas"--this in a wheedling tone--"you might give me some brandy to drink your health in to-night. It is very good to get drunk when one has to be sober, and perhaps dead, for a long time afterwards. It would be nice to remember when one is a spook, or an angel with white wings, such as the old baas, your father, used to tell us about in school on the Sabbath."

At this point, finding Hans hopeless, I got up and walked away, leaving him to finish our preparations.

That evening there was a prayer-meeting in the camp, for although no pastor was present, one of the Boer elders took his place and offered up supplications which, if simple and even absurd in their wording, at least were hearty enough. Amongst other requests, I remember that he petitioned for the safety of those who were to go on the mission to Dingaen and of those who were to remain behind. Alas! those prayers were not heard, for it pleased the Power to Whom they were addressed to decree otherwise.

After this meeting, in which I took an earnest share, Retief who just before it began had ridden in from Doornkop, whither he had been to visit his wife, held a kind of council, whereat the names of those who had volunteered or been ordered to accompany him, were finally taken down. At this council there was a good deal of discussion, since many of

the Boers did not think the expedition wise--at any rate, if it was to be carried out on so large a scale. One of them, I forget which, an old man, pointed out that it might look like a war party, and that it would be wiser if only five or six went, as they had done before, since then there could be no mistake as to the peaceful nature of their intentions.

Retief himself combated this view, and at last turned suddenly to me, who was listening near by, and said:

"Allan Quatermain, you are young, but you have a good judgment; also, you are one of the very few who know Dingaana and can speak his language. Tell us now, what do you think?"

Thus adjured, I answered, perhaps moved thereto more than I thought by Hans's talk, that I, too, considered the thing dangerous, and that someone whose life was less valuable than the commandant's should go in command.

"Why do you say so, nephew," he said irritably, "seeing that all white men's lives are of equal value, and I can smell no danger in the business?"

"Because, commandant, I do smell danger, though what danger I cannot say, any more than a dog or a buck can when it sniffs something in the air and barks or runs. Dingaana is a tamed tiger just now, but tigers are not house cats that one can play with them, as I know, who have felt his

claws and just, only just, come out from between them."

"What do you mean, nephew?" asked Retief in his direct fashion. "Do you believe that this swartzel" (that is, black creature) "means to kill us?"

"I believe that it is quite possible," I answered.

"Then, nephew, being a reasonable man as you are, you must have some ground for your belief. Come now, out with it."

"I have none, commandant, except that one who can set the lives of a dozen folk against a man's skill in shooting at birds on the wing, and who can kill people to be a bait for those birds, is capable of anything. Moreover, he told me that he did not love you Boers, and why should he?"

Now, all those who were standing about seemed to be impressed with this argument. At any rate, they turned towards Retief, anxiously waiting for his reply.

"Doubtless," answered the commandant, who, as I have said, was irritable that night, "doubtless those English missionaries have poisoned the king's mind against us Boers. Also," he added suspiciously, "I think you told me, Allan, that the king said he liked you and meant to spare you, even if he killed your companions, just because you also are English.

Are you sure that you do not know more than you choose to tell us?
Has Dingaan perhaps confided something to you--just because you are
English?"

Then noting that these words moved the assembled Boers, in whom race
prejudice and recent events had created a deep distrust of any born of
British blood, I grew very angry and answered:

"Commandant, Dingaan confided nothing to me, except that some Kaffir
witch-doctor, who is named Zikali, a man I never saw, had told him that
he must not kill an Englishman, and therefore he wished to spare me,
although one of your people, Hernan Pereira, had whispered to him that
I ought to be killed. Yet I say outright that I think you are foolish to
visit this king with so large a force. Still, I am ready to do so myself
with one or two others. Let me go, then, and try to persuade him to sign
this treaty as to the land. If I am killed or fail, you can follow after
me and do better."

"Allemachte!" exclaimed Retief; "that is a fair offer. But how do I
know, nephew, that when we came to read the treaty we should not find
that it granted all the land to you English and not to us Boers? No, no,
don't look angry. That was not a right thing to say, for you are honest
whatever most of your blood may be. Nephew Allan, you who are a brave
man, are afraid of this journey. Now, why is that, I wonder? Ah! I have
it. I had forgotten. You are to be married to-morrow morning to a very
pretty girl, and it is not natural that you should wish to spend the

next fortnight in Zululand. Don't you see, brothers, he wants to get out of it because he is going to be married, as it is natural that he should, and therefore he tries to frighten us all? When we were going to be married, should we have wished to ride away at once to visit some stinking savage? Ach! I am glad I thought of that just as I was beginning to turn his gloomy colour, like a chameleon on a black hat, for it explains everything," and he struck his thigh with his big hand and burst into a roar of laughter.

All the company of Boers who stood around began to laugh also, uproariously, for this primitive joke appealed to them. Moreover, their nerves were strained; they also dreaded this expedition, and therefore they were glad to relieve themselves in bucolic merriment. Everything was clear to them now. Feeling myself in honour bound to go on the embassy, as I was their only interpreter, I, artful dog, was trying to play upon their fears in order to prevent it from starting, so that I might have a week or two of the company of my new-wed wife. They saw and appreciated the joke.

"He's slim, this little Englishman," shouted one.

"Don't be angry with him. We should have done as much ourselves," replied another.

"Leave him behind," said a third. "Even the Zulus do not send a new-married man on service." Then they smacked me on the back, and

hustled me in their rude, kindly manner, till at length I fell into a rage and hit one of them on the nose, at which he only laughed the louder, although I made it bleed.

"See here, friends," I said, as soon as silence was restored; "married or no, whoever does not ride to Dingaan, I ride to him, although it is against my judgment. Let those laugh loudest who laugh last."

"Good!" cried one; "if you set the pace we shall soon be home again, Allan Quatermain. Who would not with Marie Marais at the end of the journey?"

Then, followed by their rough and mocking laughter, I broke away from them, and took refuge in my wagon, little guessing that all this talk would be brought up against me on a day to come.

In a certain class of uneducated mind foresight is often interpreted as guilty knowledge.