

## CHAPTER XX. THE COURT-MARTIAL

One hour, two hours, three hours, and then suddenly from the top of a rise the sight of the beautiful Mooi River winding through the plain like a vast snake of silver, and there, in a loop of it, the flat-crested koppie on which I had hoped to make my home. Had hoped!--why should I not still hope? For aught I knew everything might yet be well. Marie might have escaped the slaughter as I had done, and if so, after all our troubles perchance many years of life and happiness awaited us. Only it seemed too good to be true.

I flogged my horse, but the poor beast was tired out and could only break into short canters, that soon lapsed to a walk again. But whether it cantered or whether it walked, its hoofs seemed to beat out the words--"Too good to be true!" Sometimes they beat them fast, and sometimes they beat them slow, but always their message seemed the same.

Hans, too, was outworn and weak from starvation. Also he had a cut upon his foot which hampered him so much that at last he said I had better go on alone; he would follow more slowly. Then I dismounted and set him on the horse, walking by it myself.

Thus it came about that the gorgeous sunset was finished and the sky had grown grey with night before we reached the foot of the koppie. Yet the last rays of the sinking orb had shown me something as they died. There

on the slope of the hill stood some mud and wattle houses, such as I had ordered to be built, and near to them several white-capped wagons. Only I did not see any smoke rising from those houses as there should have been at this hour of the day, when men cooked their evening food. The moon would be up presently, I knew, but meanwhile it was dark and the tired horse stumbled and floundered among the stones which lay about at the foot of the hill.

I could bear it no longer.

"Hans," I said, "do you stay here with the horse. I will creep to the houses and see if any dwell there."

"Be careful, baas," he answered, "lest you should find Zulus, for those black devils are all about."

I nodded, for I could not speak, and then began the ascent. For several hundred yards I crept from stone to stone, feeling my way, for the Kaffir path that led to the little plateau where the spring was, above which the shanties stood, ran at the other end of the hill. I struck the spruit or rivulet that was fed by this spring, being guided to it by the murmur of the water, and followed up its bank till I heard a sound which caused me to crouch and listen.

I could not be sure because of the ceaseless babble of the brook, but the sound seemed like that of sobs. While I waited the great moon

appeared suddenly above a bank of inky cloud, flooding the place with light, and oh! by that light, looking more ethereal than woman I saw--I saw Marie!

She stood not five paces from me, by the side of the stream, whither she had come to draw water, for she held a vessel in her hand. She was clothed in some kind of a black garment, such as widows wear, but made of rough stuff, and above it her face showed white in the white rays of the moon. Gazing at her from the shadow, I could even see the tears running down her cheeks, for it was she who wept in this lonely place, wept for one who would return no more.

My voice choked in my throat; I could not utter a single word. Rising from behind a rock I moved towards her. She saw me and started, then said in a thrilling whisper:

"Oh! husband, has God sent you to call me? I am ready, husband, I am ready!" and she stretched out her arms wildly, letting fall the vessel, that clanked upon the ground.

"Marie!" I gasped at length; and at that word the blood rushed to her face and brow, and I saw her draw in her breath as though to scream.

"Hush!" I whispered. "It is I, Allan, who have escaped alive."

The next thing I remember was that she lay in my arms.

"What has happened here?" I asked when I had told my tale, or some of it.

"Nothing, Allan," she answered. "I received your letter at the camp, and we trekked away as you bade us, without telling the others why, because you remember the Commandant Retief wrote to us not to do so. So we were out of the great slaughter, for the Zulus did not know where we had gone, and never followed us here, although I have heard that they sought for me. My father and my cousin Hernan only arrived at the camp two days after the attack, and discovering or guessing our hiding-place--I know not which--rode on hither. They say they came to warn the Boers to be careful, for they did not trust Dingaan, but were too late. So they too were out of the slaughter, for, Allan, many, many have been killed--they say five or six hundred, most of them women and children. But thank God! many more escaped, since the men came in from the other camps farther off and from their shooting parties, and drove away the Zulus, killing them by scores."

"Are your father and Pereira here now?" I asked.

"No, Allan. They learned of the massacre and that the Zulus were all gone yesterday morning. Also they got the bad news that Retief and everyone with him had been killed at Dingaan's town, it is said through the treachery of the English, who arranged with Dingaan that he should

kill them."

"That is false," I said; "but go on."

"Then, Allan, they came and told me that I was a widow like many other women--I who had never been a wife. Allan, Hernan said that I should not grieve for you, as you deserved your fate, since you had been caught in your own snare, being one of those who had betrayed the Boers. The Vrouw Prinsloo answered to his face that he lied, and, Allan, I said that I would never speak to him again until we met before the Judgment Seat of God; nor will I do so."

"But I will speak to him," I muttered. "Well, where are they now?"

"They rode this morning back to the other Boers. I think they want to bring a party of them here to settle, if they like this place, as it is so easy to defend. They said they would return to-morrow, and that meanwhile we were quite safe, as they had sure tidings that all the Zulus were back over the Tugela, taking some of their wounded with them, and also the Boer cattle as an offering to Dingaan. But come to the house, Allan--our home that I had made ready for you as well as I could. Oh! my God! our home on the threshold of which I believed you would never set a foot. Yes, when the moon rose from that cloud I believed it, and look, they are still quite close together. Hark, what is that?"

I listened, and caught the sound of a horse's hoofs stumbling among the

rocks.

"Don't be frightened," I answered; "it is only Hans with my horse. He escaped also; I will tell you how afterwards." And as I spoke he appeared, a woebegone and exhausted object.

"Good day, missie," he said with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Now you should give me a fine dinner, for you see I have brought the baas back safe to you. Did I not tell you, baas, that everything would come right?"

Then he grew silent from exhaustion. Nor were we sorry, who at that moment did not wish to listen to the poor fellow's talk.

Something over two hours had gone by since the moon broke out from the clouds. I had greeted the Vrouw Prinsloo and all my other friends, and been received by them with rapture as one risen from the dead. If they had loved me before, now a new gratitude was added to their love, since had it not been for my warning they also must have made acquaintance with the Zulu spears and perished. It was on their part of the camp that the worst of the attack fell. Indeed, from those wagons hardly anyone escaped.

I had told them all the story, to which they listened in dead silence. Only when it was finished the Heer Meyer, whose natural gloom had been

deepened by all these events, said:

"Allemachte! but you have luck, Allan, to be left when everyone else is taken. Now, did I not know you so well, like Hernan Pereira I should think that you and that devil Dingaam had winked at each other."

The Vrouw Prinsloo turned on him furiously.

"How dare you say such words, Carl Meyer?" she exclaimed. "Must Allan always be insulted just because he is English, which he cannot help? For my part, I think that if anyone winked at Dingaam it was the stinkcat Pereira. Otherwise why did he come away before the killing and bring that madman, Henri Marais, with him?"

"I don't know, I am sure, aunt," said Meyer humbly, for like everyone else he was afraid of the Vrouw Prinsloo.

"Then why can't you hold your tongue instead of saying silly things which must give pain?" asked the vrouw. "No, don't answer, for you will only make matters worse; but take the rest of that meat to the poor Hottentot, Hans"--I should explain that we had been supping--"who, although he has eaten enough to burst any white stomach, I dare say can manage another pound or two."

Meyer obeyed meekly, and the others melted away also as they were wont to do when the vrouw showed signs of war, so that she and we two were

left alone.

"Now," said the vrouw, "everyone is tired, and I say that it is time to go to rest. Good night, nephew Allan and niece Marie," and she waddled away leaving us together.

"Husband," said Marie presently, "will you come and see the home that I made ready for you before I thought that you were dead? It is a poor place, but I pray God that we may be happy there," and she took me by the hand and kissed me once and twice and thrice.

About noon on the following day, when my wife and I were laughing and arguing over some little domestic detail of our meagre establishment--so soon are great griefs forgotten in an overwhelming joy, of a sudden I saw her face change, and asked what was the matter.

"Hist!" she said, "I hear horses," and she pointed in a certain direction.

I looked, and there, round the corner of the hill, came a body of Boers with their after-riders, thirty-two or three of them in all, of whom twenty were white men.

"See," said Marie, "my father is among them, and my cousin Hernan rides at his side."



It was true. There was Henri Marais, and just behind him, talking into his ear, rode Hernan Pereira. I remember that the two of them reminded me of a tale I had read about a man who was cursed with an evil genius that drew him to some dreadful doom in spite of the promptings of his better nature. The thin, worn, wild-eyed Marais, and the rich-faced, carnal Pereira whispering slyly into his ear; they were exact types of that man in the story and his evil genius who dragged him down to hell. Prompted by some impulse, I threw my arms round Marie and embraced her, saying:

"At least we have been very happy for a while."

"What do you mean, Allan?" she asked doubtfully.

"Only that I think our good hours are done with for the present."

"Perhaps," she answered slowly; "but at least they have been very good hours, and if I should die to-day I am glad to have lived to win them."

Then the cavalcade of Boers came up.

Hernan Pereira, his senses sharpened perhaps by the instincts of hate and jealousy, was the first to recognise me.

"Why, Mynheer Allan Quatermain," he said, "how is it that you are here?"

How is it that you still live? Commandant," he added, turning to a dark, sad-faced man of about sixty whom at that time I did not know, "here is a strange thing. This Heer Quatermain, an Englishman, was with the Governor Retief at the town of the Zulu king, as the Heer Henri Marais can testify. Now, as we know for sure Pieter Retief and all his people are dead, murdered by Dingaan, how then does it happen that this man has escaped?"

"Why do you put riddles to me, Mynheer Pereira?" asked the dark Boer.

"Doubtless the Englishman will explain."

"Certainly I will, mynheer," I said. "Is it your pleasure that I should speak now?"

The commandant hesitated. Then, having called Henri Marais apart and talked to him for a little while, he replied:

"No, not now, I think; the matter is too serious. After we have eaten we will listen to your story, Mynheer Quatermain, and meanwhile I command you not to leave this place."

"Do you mean that I am a prisoner, commandant?" I asked.

"If you put it so--yes, Mynheer Quatermain--a prisoner who has to explain how some sixty of our brothers, who were your companions, came to be butchered like beasts in Zululand, while you escaped. Now, no

more words; by and by doubtless there will be plenty of them. Here you, Carolus and Johannes, keep watch upon this Englishman, of whom I hear strange stories, with your guns loaded, please, and when we send to you, lead him before us."

"As usual, your cousin Hernan brings evil gifts," I said to Marie bitterly. "Well, let us also eat our dinner, which perhaps the Heeren Carolus and Johannes will do us the honour to share--bringing their loaded guns with them."

Carolus and Johannes accepted the invitation, and from them we heard much news, all of it terrible enough to learn, especially the details of the massacre in that district, which, because of this fearful event is now and always will be known as Weenen, or The Place of Weeping. Suffice it to say that they were quite enough to take away all our appetite, although Carolus and Johannes, who by this time had recovered somewhat from the shock of that night of blood and terror, ate in a fashion which might have filled Hans himself with envy.

Shortly after we had finished our meal, Hans, who, by the way, seemed to have quite recovered from his fatigues, came to remove the dishes. He informed us that all the Boers were having a great "talk," and that they were about to send for me. Sure enough, a few minutes later two armed men arrived and ordered me to follow them. I turned to say some words of farewell to Marie, but she said:

"I go where you do, husband," and, as no objection was made by the guard, she came.

About two hundred yards away, sitting under the shade of one of the wagons, we found the Boers. Six of them were seated in a semicircle upon stools or whatever they could find, the black-browed commandant being in the centre and having in front of him a rough table on which were writing materials.

To the left of these six were the Prinsloos and Meyers, being those folk whom I had rescued from Delagoa, and to the right the other Boers who had ridden into the camp that morning. I saw at a glance that a court-martial had been arranged and that the six elders were the judges, the commandant being the president of the court.

I do not give their names purposely, since I have no wish that the actual perpetrators of the terrible blunder that I am about to describe should be known to posterity. After all, they acted honestly according to their lights, and were but tools in the hand of that villain Hernan Pereira.

"Allan Quatermain," said the commandant, "you are brought here to be tried by a court-martial duly constituted according to the law published in the camps of the emigrant Boers. Do you acknowledge that law?"

"I know that there is such a law, commandant," I answered, "but I do not

acknowledge the authority of your court-martial to try a man who is no Boer, but a subject of the Queen of Great Britain."

"We have considered that point, Allan Quatermain," said the commandant, "and we disallow it. You will remember that in the camp at Bushman's River, before you rode with the late Pieter Retief to the chief Sikonyela, when you were given command of the Zulus who went with him, you took an oath to interpret truly and to be faithful in all things to the General Retief, to his companions and to his cause. That oath we hold gives this court jurisdiction over you."

"I deny your jurisdiction," I answered, "although it is true that I took an oath to interpret faithfully, and I request that a note of my denial may be made in writing."

"It shall be done," said the commandant, and laboriously he made the note on the paper before him.

When he had finished he looked up and said: "The charge against you, Allan Quatermain, is that, being one of the commission who recently visited the Zulu king Dingaan, under command of the late Governor and General Pieter Retief, you did falsely and wickedly urge the said Dingaan to murder the said Pieter Retief and his companions, and especially Henri Marais, your father-in-law, and Hernando Pereira, his nephew, with both of whom you had a quarrel. Further, that afterwards you brought about the said murder, having first arranged with the king

of the Zulus that you should be removed to a place of safety while it was done. Do you plead Guilty or Not guilty?"

Now when I heard this false and abominable charge my rage and indignation caused me to laugh aloud.

"Are you mad, commandant," I exclaimed, "that you should say such things? On what evidence is this wicked lie advanced against me?"

"No, Allan Quatermain, I am not mad," he replied, "although it is true that through your evil doings I, who have lost my wife and three children by the Zulu spears, have suffered enough to make me mad. As for the evidence against you, you shall hear it. But first I will write down that you plead Not guilty."

He did so, then said:

"If you will acknowledge certain things it will save us all much time, of which at present we have little to spare. Those things are that knowing what was going to happen to the commission, you tried to avoid accompanying it. Is that true?"

"No," I answered. "I knew nothing of what was going to happen to the commission, though I feared something, having but just saved my friends there"--and I pointed to the Prinsloos--"from death at the hands of Dingaen. I did not wish to accompany it for another reason: that I had

been married on the day of its starting to Marie Marais. Still, I went after all because the General Retief, who was my friend, asked me to come, to interpret for him."

Now some of the Boers present said:

"That is true. We remember."

But the commandant continued, taking no heed of my answer or these interruptions.

"Do you acknowledge that you were on bad terms with Henri Marais and with Hernan Pereira?"

"Yes," I answered; "because Henri Marais did all in his power to prevent my marriage with his daughter Marie, behaving very ill to me who had saved his life and that of his people who remained to him up by Delagoa, and afterwards at Umgungundhlovu. Because, too, Hernan Pereira strove to rob me of Marie, who loved me. Moreover, although I had saved him when he lay sick to death, he afterwards tried to murder me by shooting me down in a lonely place. Here is the mark of it," and I touched the little scar upon the side of my forehead.

"That is true; he did so, the stinkcat," shouted the Vrouw Prinsloo, and was ordered to be silent.

"Do you acknowledge," went on the commandant, "that you sent to warn your wife and those with her to depart from the camp on the Bushman's River, because it was going to be attacked, charging them to keep the matter secret, and that afterwards both you and your Hottentot servant alone returned safely from Zululand, where all those who went with you lie dead?"

"I acknowledge," I answered, "that I wrote to tell my wife to come to this place where I had been building houses, as you see, and to bring with her any of our companions who cared to trek here, or, failing that, to go alone. This I did because Dingaan had told me, whether in jest or in earnest I did not know, that he had given orders that my said wife should be kidnapped, as he desired to make her one of his women, having thought her beautiful when he saw her. Also what I did was done with the knowledge and by the wish of the late Governor Retief, as can be shown by his writing on my letter. I acknowledge also that I escaped when all my brothers were killed, as did the Hottentot Hans, and if you wish to know I will tell you how we escaped and why."

The commandant made a further note, then he said:

"Let the witness Hernan Pereira be called and sworn."

This was done and he was ordered to tell his tale.

As may be imagined, it was a long tale, and one that had evidently been



prepared with great care. I will only set down its blackest falsehoods. He assured the court that he had no enmity against me and had never attempted to kill me or do me any harm, although it was true that his heart felt sore because, against her father's will, I had stolen away the affection of his betrothed, who was now my wife. He said that he had stopped in Zululand because he knew that I should marry her as soon as she came of age, and it was too great pain for him to see this done. He said that while he was there, before the arrival of the commission, Dingaan and some of his captains had told him that I had again and again urged him, Dingaan, to kill the Boers because they were traitors to the sovereign of England, but that he, Dingaan, had refused to do so. He said that when Retief came up with the commission he tried to warn him against me, but that Retief would not listen, being infatuated with me as many others were, and he looked towards the Prinsloos.

Then came the worst of all. He said that while he was engaged in mending some guns for Dingaan in one of his private huts, he overheard a conversation between myself and Dingaan which took place outside the hut, I, of course, not knowing that he was within. The substance of this conversation was that I again urged Dingaan to kill the Boers and afterwards to send an impi to massacre their wives and families. Only I asked him to give me time to get away a girl whom I had married from among them, and with her a few of my own friends whom I wished should be spared, as I intended to become a kind of chief over them, and if he would grant it me, to hold all the land of Natal under his rule and the protection of the English. To these proposals Dingaan answered

that "they seemed wise and good, and that he would think them over very carefully."

Pereira said further that coming out of the hut after Dingaan had gone away he reproached me bitterly for my wickedness, and announced that he would warn the Boers, which he did subsequently by word of mouth and in writing. That thereon I caused him to be detained by the Zulus while I went to Retief and told him some false story about him, Pereira, which caused Retief to drive him out of his camp and give orders that none of the Boers should so much as speak to him. That then he did the only thing he could. Going to his uncle, Henri Marais, he told him, not all the truth, but that he had learnt for certain that his daughter Marie was in dreadful danger of her life because of some intended attack of the Zulus, and that all the Boers among whom she dwelt were also in danger of their lives.

Therefore he suggested to Henri Marais that as the General Retief was besotted and would not listen to his story, the best thing they could do was to ride away and warn the Boers. This then they did secretly, without the knowledge of Retief, but being delayed upon their journey by one accident and another, which he set out in detail, they only reached the Bushman's River too late, after the massacre had taken place.

Subsequently, as the commandant knew, hearing a rumour that Marie Marais and other Boers had trekked to this place before the slaughter, they came here and learned that they had done so upon a warning sent to them by Allan Quatermain, whereon they returned and communicated the news to

the surviving Boers at Bushman's River.

That was all he had to say.

Then, as I reserved my cross-examination until I heard all the evidence against me, Henri Marais was sworn and corroborated his nephew's testimony on many points as to my relations to his daughter, his objection to my marriage to her because I was an Englishman whom he disliked and mistrusted, and so forth. He added further that it was true Pereira had told him he had sure information that Marie and the Boers were in danger from an attack upon them which had been arranged between Allan Quatermain and Dingaan; that he also had written to Retief and tried to speak to him but was refused a hearing. Thereon he had ridden away from Umgungundhlovu to try to save his daughter and warn the Boers. That was all he had to say.

As there were no further witnesses for the prosecution I cross-examined these two at full length, but absolutely without results, since every vital question that I asked was met with a direct negative.

Then I called my witnesses, Marie, whose evidence they refused to hear on the ground that she was my wife and prejudiced, the Vrouw Prinsloo and her family, and the Meyers. One and all told a true story of my relations with Hernan Pereira, Henri Marais, and Dingaan, so far as they knew them.

After this, as the commandant declined to take the evidence of Hans because he was a Hottentot and my servant, I addressed the court, relating exactly what had taken place between me and Dingaan, and how I and Hans came to escape on our second visit to his kraal. I pointed out also that unhappily for myself I could not prove my words, since Dingaan was not available as a witness, and all the others were dead. Further, I produced my letter to Marie, which was endorsed by Retief, and the letter to Retief signed by Marais and Pereira which remained in my possession.

By the time that I had finished my speech the sun was setting and everyone was tired out. I was ordered to withdraw under guard, while the court consulted, which it did for a long while. Then I was called forward again and the commandant said:

"Allan Quatermain, after prayer to God we have considered this case to the best of our judgment and ability. On the one hand we note that you are an Englishman, a member of a race which hates and has always oppressed our people, and that it was to your interest to get rid of two of them with whom you had quarrelled. The evidence of Henri Marais and Hernan Pereira, which we cannot disbelieve, shows that you were wicked enough, either in order to do this, or because of your malice against the Boer people, to plot their destruction with a savage. The result is that some seven hundred men, women, and children have lost their lives in a very cruel manner, whereas you, your servant, your wife and your friends have alone escaped unharmed. For such a crime as this a

hundred deaths could not pay; indeed, God alone can give to it its just punishment, and to Him it is our duty to send you to be judged. We condemn you to be shot as a traitor and a murderer, and may He have mercy on your soul."

At these dreadful words Marie fell to the ground fainting and a pause ensued while she was carried off to the Prinsloos' house, whither the vrouw followed to attend her. Then the commandant went on:

"Still, although we have thus passed judgment on you; because you are an Englishman against whom it might be said that we had prejudices, and because you have had no opportunity of preparing a defence, and no witnesses to the facts, since all those whom you say you could have called are dead, we think it right that this unanimous sentence of ours should be confirmed by a general court of the emigrant Boers. Therefore to-morrow morning you will be taken with us to the Bushman's River camp, where the case will be settled, and, if necessary, execution done in accordance with the verdict of the generals and veld-cornets of that camp. Meanwhile you will be kept in custody in your own house. Now have you anything to say against this sentence?"

"Yes, this," I answered, "that although you do not know it, it is an unjust sentence, built up on the lies of one who has always been my enemy, and of a man whose brain is rotten. I never betrayed the Boers. If anyone betrayed them it was Hernan Pereira himself, who, as I proved to the General Retief, had been praying Dingaan to kill me, and whom

Retief threatened to put upon his trial for this very crime, for which reason and no other Pereira fled from the kraal, taking his tool Henri Marais with him. You have asked God to judge me. Well, I ask God to judge him and Henri Marais also, and I know He will in one way or another. As for me, I am ready to die, as I have been for months while serving the cause of you Boers. Shoot me now if you will, and make an end. But I tell you that if I escape your hands I will not suffer this treatment to go unpunished. I will lay my case before the rulers of my people, and if necessary before my Queen, yes, if I have to travel to London to do it, and you Boers shall learn that you cannot condemn an innocent Englishman upon false testimony and not pay the price. I tell you that price shall be great if I live, and if I die it shall be greater still."

Now these words, very foolish words, I admit, which being young and inexperienced I spoke in my British pride, I could see made a great impression upon my judges. They believed, to be fair to them, that they had passed a just sentence. Blinded by prejudice and falsehood, and maddened by the dreadful losses their people had suffered during the past few days at the hands of a devilish savage, they believed that I was the instigator of those losses, one who ought to die. Indeed, all, or nearly all the Boers were persuaded that Dingaan was urged to this massacre by the counsels of Englishmen. The mere fact of my own and my servant's miraculous escape, when all my companions had perished, proved my guilt to them without the evidence of Pereira, which, being no lawyers, they thought sufficient to justify their verdict.

Still, they had an uneasy suspicion that this evidence was not conclusive, and might indeed be rejected in toto by a more competent court upon various grounds. Also they knew themselves to be rebels who had no legal right to form a court, and feared the power of the long arm of England, from which for a little while they had escaped. If I were allowed to tell my tale to the Parliament in London, what might not happen to them, they wondered--to them who had ventured to pass sentence of death upon a subject of the Queen of Great Britain? Might not this turn the scale against them? Might not Britain arise in wrath and crush them, these men who dared to invoke her forms of law in order to kill her citizen? Those, as I learned afterwards, were the thoughts that passed through their minds.

Also another thought passed through their minds--that if the sentence were executed at once, a dead man cannot appeal, and that here I had no friends to take up my cause and avenge me. But of all this they said nothing. Only at a sign I was marched away to my little house and imprisoned under guard.

Now I propose to tell the rest of the history of these tragic events as they happened, although some of them did not come to my knowledge till the morrow or afterwards, for I think this will be the more simple and the easier plan.