CHAPTER III

THE HUNTERS HUNTED

While I was taking off my boots I heard a noise of jabbering in some native tongue which I took to be Sisutu, and not wishing to go to the trouble of putting them on again, called to the driver of the wagon to find out what it was. This man was a Cape Colony Kaffir, a Fingo I think, with a touch of Hottentot in him. He was an excellent driver, indeed I do not think I have ever seen a better, and by no means a bad shot. Among Europeans he rejoiced in the name of Footsack, a Boer Dutch term which is generally addressed to troublesome dogs and means "Get out." To tell the truth, had I been his master he would have got out, as I suspected him of drinking, and generally did not altogether trust him. Anscombe, however, was fond of him because he had shown courage in some hunting adventure in Matabeleland, I think it was at the shooting of that very dark-coloured lion whose skin had been the means of making us acquainted nearly two years before.

Indeed he said that on this occasion Footsack had saved his life, though from all that I could gather I do not think this was quite the case. Also the man, who had been on many hunting trips with sportsmen, could talk Dutch well and English enough to make himself understood, and therefore was useful.

He went as I bade him, and coming back presently, told me that a party of Basutos, about thirty in number, who were returning from Kimberley, where they had been at work in the mines, under the leadership of a Bastard named Karl, asked leave to camp by the wagon for the night, as they were afraid to go on to "Tampel" in the dark.

At first I could not make out what "Tampel" was, as it did not sound like a native name. Then I remembered that Mr. Marnham had spoken of his house as being called the Temple, of which, of course, Tampel was a corruption; also that he said he and his partner were labour agents.

"Why are they afraid?" I asked.

"Because, Baas, they say that they must go through a wood in a swamp, which they think is haunted by spooks, and they much afraid of spooks;" that is of ghosts.

"What spooks?" I asked.

"Don't know, Baas. They say spook of some one who has been killed."

"Rubbish," I replied. "Tell them to go and catch the spook; we don't want a lot of noisy fellows howling chanties here all night."

Then it was that Anscombe broke in in his humorous, rather drawling voice.

"How can you be so hard-hearted, Quatermain? After the supernatural terror which, as I told you, I experienced in that very place, I wouldn't condemn a kicking mule to go through it in this darkness. Let the poor devils stay; I daresay they are tired."

So I gave in, and presently saw their fires beginning to burn through the end canvas of the wagon which was unlaced because the night was hot. Also later on I woke up, about midnight I think, and heard voices talking, one of which I reflected sleepily, sounded very like that of Footsack.

Waking very early, as is my habit, I peeped out of the wagon, and through the morning mist perceived Footsack in converse with a particularly villainous-looking person. I at once concluded this

must be Karl, evidently a Bastard compounded of about fifteen parts of various native bloods to one of white, who, to add to his attractions, was deeply scarred with smallpox and possessed a really alarming squint. It seemed to me that Footsack handed to this man something that looked suspiciously like a bottle of squareface gin wrapped up in dried grass, and that the man handed back to Footsack some small object which he put in his mouth.

Now, I wondered to myself, what is there of value that one who does not eat sweets would stow away in his mouth. Gold coin perhaps, or a quid of tobacco, or a stone. Gold was too much to pay for a bottle of gin, tobacco was too little, but how about the stone? What stone? Who wanted stones? Then suddenly I remembered that these people were said to come from Kimberley, and whistled to myself. Still I did nothing, principally because the mist was still so dense that although I could see the men's faces, I could not clearly see the articles which they passed to each other about two feet lower, where it still lay very thickly, and to bring any accusation against a native which he can prove to be false is apt to destroy authority. So I held my tongue and waited my chance. It did not come at once, for before I was dressed those Basutos had departed together with their leader Karl, for now that the sun was up they no longer feared the haunted bush.

It came later, thus: We were trekking along between the thorns

upon a level and easy track which enabled the driver Footsack to sit upon the "voorkisse" or driving box of the wagon, leaving the lad who is called the voorlooper to lead the oxen. Anscombe was riding parallel to the wagon in the hope of killing some guineafowl for the pot (though a very poor shot with a rifle he was good with a shot-gun). I, who did not care for this small game, was seated smoking by the side of Footsack who, I noted, smelt of gin and generally showed signs of dissipation. Suddenly I said to him--

"Show me that diamond which the Bastard Karl gave you this morning in payment for the bottle of your master's drink."

It was a bow drawn at a venture, but the effect of the shot was remarkable. Had I not caught it, the long bamboo whip Footsack held would have fallen to the ground, while he collapsed in his seat like a man who has received a bullet in his stomach.

"Baas," he gasped, "Baas, how did you know?"

"I knew," I replied grandly, "in the same way that I know everything. Show me the diamond."

"Baas," he said, "it was not the Baas Anscombe's gin, it was some I bought in Pilgrim's Rest."

"I have counted the bottles in the case and know very well whose gin it was," I replied ambiguously, for the reason that I had done nothing of the sort. "Show me the diamond."

Footsack fumbled about his person, his hair, his waistcoat pockets and even his moocha, and ultimately from somewhere produced a stone which he handed to me. I looked at it, and from the purity of colour and size, judged it to be a diamond worth #200, or possibly more. After careful examination I put it into my pocket, saying,

"This is the price of your master's gin and therefore belongs to him as much as it does to anybody. Now if you want to keep out of trouble, tell me--whence came it into the hands of that man, Karl?"

"Baas," replied Footsack, trembling all over, "how do I know? He and the rest have been working at the mines; I suppose he found it there."

"Indeed! And did he find others of the same sort?"

"I think so, Baas. At least he said that he had been buying bottles of gin with such stones all the way down from Kimberley. Karl is a great drunkard, Baas, as I am sure, who have known him for years."

"That is not all," I remarked, keeping my eyes fixed on him. "What else did he say?"

"He said, Baas, that he was very much afraid of returning to the Baas Marnham whom the Kaffirs call White-beard, with only a few stones left."

"Why was he afraid?"

"Because the Baas Whitebeard, he who dwells at Tampel, is, he says, a very angry man if he thinks himself cheated, and Karl is afraid lest he should kill him as another was killed, he whose spook haunts the wood through which those silly people feared to pass last night."

"Who was killed and who killed him?" I asked.

"Baas, I don't know," replied Footsack, collapsing into sullen silence in a way that Kaffirs have when suddenly they realize that they have said too much. Nor did I press the matter further, having learned enough.

What had I learned? This: that Messrs. Marnham & Rodd were illicit diamond buyers, I.D.B.'s as they are called, who had cunningly situated themselves at a great distance from the scene

of operations practically beyond the reach of civilized law. Probably they were engaged also in other nefarious dealings with Kaffirs, such as supplying them with guns wherewith to make war upon the Whites. Sekukuni had been fighting us recently, so that there would be a very brisk market for rifles. This, too, would account for Marnham's apparent knowledge of that Chief's plans. Possibly, however, he had no knowledge and only made a pretence of it to keep us out of the country.

Later on I confided the whole story and my suspicions to Anscombe, who was much interested.

"What picturesque scoundrels!" he exclaimed, "We really ought to go back to the Temple. I have always longed to meet some real live I.D.B.'s."

"It is probable that you have done that already without knowing it. For the rest, if you wish to visit that den of iniquity, you must do so alone."

"Wouldn't whited sepulchre be a better term, especially as it seems to cover dead men's bones?" he replied in his frivolous manner.

Then I asked him what he was going to do about Footsack and the bottle of gin, which he countered by asking me what I was going

to do with that diamond.

"Give it to you as Footsack's master," I said, suiting the action to the word. "I don't wish to be mixed up in doubtful transactions."

Then followed a long argument as to who was the real owner of the stone, which ended in its being hidden away be produced if called for, and in Footsack, who ought have had a round dozen, receiving a scolding from his master, coupled with the threat that if he stole more gin he would be handed over to a magistrate--when we met one.

On the following day we reached the hot, low-lying veld which the herd of buffalo was said to inhabit. Next morning, however, when we were making ready to begin hunting, a Basuto Kaffir appeared who, on being questioned, said that he was one of Sekukuni's people sent to this district to look for two lost oxen. I did not believe this story, thinking it more probable that he was a spy, but asked him whether in his hunt for oxen he had come across buffalo.

He replied that he had, a herd of thirty-two of them, counting the calves, but that they were over the Oliphant's River about five-and-twenty miles away, in a valley between some outlying hills and the rugged range of mountains, beyond which was

situated Sekukuni's town. Moreover, in proof of his story he showed me spoor of the beasts heading in that direction which was quite a week old.

Now for my part, as I did not think it wise to get too near to Sekukuni, I should have given them up and gone to hunt something else. Anscombe, however, was of a different opinion and pleaded hard that we should follow them. They were the only herd within a hundred miles, he said, if indeed there were any others this side of the Lebombo Mountains. As I still demurred, he suggested, in the nicest possible manner, that if I thought the business risky, I should camp somewhere with the wagon, while he went on with Footsack to look for the buffalo. I answered that I was well used to risks, which in a sense were my trade, and that as he was more or less in my charge I was thinking of him, not of myself, who was quite prepared to follow the buffalo, not only to Sekukuni's Mountains but over them. Then fearing that he had hurt my feelings, he apologized, and offered to go elsewhere if I liked. The upshot was that we decided to trek to the Oliphant's River, camp there and explore the bush on the other side on horseback, never going so far from the wagon that we could not reach it again before nightfall.

This, then, we did, outspanning that evening by the hot but beautiful river which was still haunted by a few hippopotamus and many crocodiles, one of which we shot before turning in. Next

morning, having breakfasted off cold guineafowl, we mounted, crossed the river by a ford that was quite as deep as I liked, to which the Kaffir path led us, and, leaving Footsack with the two other boys in charge of the wagon, began to hunt for the buffalo in the rather swampy bush that stretched from the further bank to the slope of the first hills, eight or ten miles away. I did not much expect to find them, as the Basuto had said that they had gone over these hills, but either he lied or they had moved back again.

Not half a mile from the river bank, just as I was about to dismount to stalk a fine waterbuck of which I caught sight standing among some coarse grass and bushes, my eye fell upon buffalo spoor that from its appearance I knew could not be more than a few hours old. Evidently the beasts had been feeding here during the night and at dawn had moved away to sleep in the dry bush nearer the hills. Beckoning to Anscombe, who fortunately had not seen the waterbuck, at which he would certainly have fired, thereby perhaps frightening the buffalo, I showed him the spoor that we at once started to follow.

Soon it led us into other spoor, that of a whole herd of thirty or forty beasts indeed, which made our task quite easy, at least till we came to harder ground, for the animals had gone a long way. An hour or more later, when we were about seven miles from the river, I perceived ahead of us, for we were now almost at the

foot of the hills, a cool and densely-wooded kloof.

"That is where they will be," I said. "Now come on carefully and make no noise."

We rode to the wide mouth of the kloof where the signs of the buffalo were numerous and fresh, dismounted and tied our horses to a thorn, so as to approach them silently on foot. We had not gone two hundred yards through the bush when suddenly about fifty paces away, standing broadside on in the shadow between two trees, I saw a splendid old bull with a tremendous pair of horns.

"Shoot," I whispered to Anscombe, "you will never get a better chance. It is the sentinel of the herd."

He knelt down, his face quite white with excitement, and covered the bull with his Express.

"Keep cool," I whispered again, "and aim behind the shoulder, half-way down."

I don't think he understood me, for at that moment off went the rifle. He hit the beast somewhere, as I heard the bullet clap, but not fatally, for it turned and lumbered off up the kloof, apparently unhurt, whereon he sent the second barrel after it, a clean miss this time. Then of a sudden all about us appeared

buffaloes that had, I suppose, been sleeping invisible to us. These, with snorts and bellows, rushed off towards the river, for having their senses about them, they had no mind to be trapped in the kloof. I could only manage a shot at one of them, a large and long-horned cow which I knocked over quite dead. If I had fired again it would have been but to wound, a thing I hate. The whole business was over in a minute. We went and looked at my dead cow which I had caught through the heart.

"It's cruel to kill these things," I said, "for I don't know what use we are going to make of them, and they must love life as much as we do."

"We'll cut the horns off," said Anscombe.

"You may if you like," I answered, "but you will find it a tough job with a sheath knife."

"Yes, I think that shall be the task of the worthy Footsack to-morrow," he replied. "Meanwhile let us go and finish off my bull, as Footsack & Co. may as well bring home two pair of horns as one."

I looked at the dense bush, and knowing something of the habits of wounded buffaloes, reflected that it would be a nasty job. Still I said nothing, because if I hesitated, I knew he would

want to go alone. So we started. Evidently the beast had been badly hit, for the blood spoor was easy to follow. Yet it had been able to retreat up to the end of the kloof that terminated in a cliff over which trickled a stream of water. Here it was not more than a hundred paces wide, and on either side of it were other precipitous cliffs. As we went from one of these a war-horn, such as the Basutos use, was blown. Although I heard it, oddly enough, I paid no attention to it at the time, being utterly intent upon the business in hand.

Following a wounded buffalo bull up a tree-clad and stony kloof is no game for children, as these beasts have a habit of returning on their tracks and then rushing out to gore you. So I went on with every sense alert, keeping Anscombe well behind me. As it happened our bull had either been knocked silly or inherited no guile from his parents. When he found he could go no further he stopped, waited behind a bush, and when he saw us he charged in a simple and primitive fashion. I let Anscombe fire, as I wished him to have the credit of killing it all to himself, but somehow or other he managed to miss both barrels. Then, trouble being imminent, I let drive as the beast lowered its head, and was lucky enough to break its spine (to shoot at the head of a buffalo is useless), so that it rolled over quite dead at our feet.

"You have got a magnificent pair of horns," I said, contemplating

the fallen giant.

"Yes," answered Anscombe, with a twinkle of his humorous eyes, "and if it hadn't been for you I think that I should have got them in more senses than one."

As the words passed his lips some missile, from its peculiar sound I judged it was the leg off an iron pot, hurtled past my head, fired evidently from a smoothbore gun with a large charge of bad powder. Then I remembered the war-horn and all that it meant.

"Off you go," I said, "we are ambushed by Kaffirs."

We were indeed, for as we tailed down that kloof, from the top of both cliffs above us came a continuous but luckily ill-directed fire. Lead-coated stones, pot legs and bullets whirred and whistled all round us, yet until the last, just when we were reaching the tree to which we had tied our horses, quite harmlessly. Then suddenly I saw Anscombe begin to limp. Still he managed to run on and mount, though I observed that he did not put his right foot into the stirrup.

"What's the matter?" I asked as we galloped off.

"Shot through the instep, I think," he answered with a laugh,

"but it doesn't hurt a bit."

"I expect it will later," I replied. "Meanwhile, thank God it wasn't at the top of the kloof. They won't catch us on the horses, which they never thought of killing first."

"They are going to try though. Look behind you."

I looked and saw twenty or thirty men emerging from the mouth of the kloof in pursuit.

"No time to stop to get those horns," he said with a sigh.

"No," I answered, "unless you are particularly anxious to say good-bye to the world pinned over a broken ant-heap in the sun, or something pleasant of the sort."

Then we rode on in silence, I thinking what a fool I had been first to allow myself to be overruled by Anscombe and cross the river, and secondly not to have taken warning from that war-horn. We could not go very fast because of the difficult and swampy nature of the ground; also the great heat of the day told on the horses. Thus it came about that when we reached the ford we were not more than ten minutes ahead of our active pursuers, good runners every one of them, and accustomed to the country. I suppose that they had orders to kill or capture us at any cost,

for instead of giving up the chase, as I hoped they would, they stuck to us in surprising fashion.

We splashed through the river, and luckily on the further bank were met by Footsack who had seen us coming and guessed that something was wrong.

"Inspan!" I shouted to him, "and be quick about it if you want to see tomorrow's light. The Basutos are after us."

Off he went like a shot, his face quite green with fear.

"Now," I said to Anscombe, as we let our horses take a drink for which they were mad, "we have got to hold this ford until the wagon is ready, or those devils will get us after all. Dismount and I'll tie up the horses."

He did so with some difficulty, and at my suggestion, while I made the beasts fast, cut the lace of his boot which was full of blood, and soaked his wounded foot, that I had no time to examine, in the cool water. These things done, I helped him to the rear of a thorn tree which was thick enough to shield most of his body, and took my own stand behind a similar thorn at a distance of a few paces.

Presently the Basutos appeared, trotting along close together

whereon Anscombe, who was seated behind the tree, fired both barrels of his Express at them at a range of about two hundred yards. It was a foolish thing to do, first because he missed them clean, for he had over-estimated the range and the bullets went above their heads, and secondly because it caused them to scatter and made them careful, whereas had they come on in a lump we could have taught them a lesson. However I said nothing, as I knew that reproaches would only make him nervous. Down went those scoundrels on to their hands and knees and, taking cover behind stones and bushes on the further bank, began to fire at us, for they were all armed with guns of one sort and another, and there was only about a hundred yards of water between us. As they effected this manoeuvre I am glad to say I was able to get two of them, while Anscombe, I think, wounded another.

After this our position grew quite warm, for as I have said the thorn trunks were not very broad, and three or four of the natives, who had probably been hunters, were by no means bad shots, though the rest of them fired wildly. Anscombe, in poking his head round the tree to shoot, had his hat knocked off by a bullet, while a slug went through the lappet of my coat. Then a worse thing happened. Either by chance or design Anscombe's horse was struck in the neck and fell struggling, whereon my beast, growing frightened, broke its riem and galloped to the wagon. That is where I ought to have left them at first, only I thought that we might need them to make a bolt on, or to carry

Anscombe if he could not walk.

Quite a long while went by before, glancing behind me, I saw that the oxen that had been grazing at a little distance had at length arrived and were being inspanned in furious haste. The Basutos saw it also, and fearing lest we should escape, determined to try to end the business. Suddenly they leapt from their cover, and with more courage than I should have expected of them, rushed into the river, proposing to storm us, which, to speak truth, I think they would have done had I not been a fairly quick shot.

As it was, finding that they were losing too heavily from our fire, they retreated in a hurry, leaving their dead behind them, and even a wounded man who was clinging to a rock. He, poor wretch, was in mortal terror lest we should shoot him again, which I had not the heart to do, although as his leg was shattered above the knee by an Express bullet, it might have been true kindness. Again and again he called out for mercy, saying that he only attacked us because his chief, who had been warned of our coming "by the White Man," ordered him to take our guns and cattle.

"What white man?" I shouted. "Speak or I shoot."

There was no answer, for at this moment he fainted from loss of

blood and vanished beneath the water. Then another Basuto, I suppose he was their captain, but do not know for he was hidden in some bushes, called out--

"Do not think that you shall escape, White Men. There are many more of our people coming, and we will kill you in the night when you cannot see to shoot us."

At this moment, too, Footsack shouted that the wagon was inspanned and ready. Now I hesitated what to do. If we made for the wagon, which must be very slowly because of Anscombe's wounded foot, we had to cross seventy or eighty yards of rising ground almost devoid of cover. If, on the other hand, we stayed where we were till nightfall a shot might catch one of us, or other Basutos might arrive and rush us. There was also a third possibility, that our terrified servants might trek off and leave us in order to save their own lives, which verily I believe they would have done, not being of Zulu blood. I put the problem to Anscombe, who shook his head and looked at his foot. Then he produced a lucky penny which he carried in his pocket and said--

"Let us invoke the Fates. Heads we run like heroes; tails we stay here like heroes," and he spun the penny, while I stared at him open-mouthed and not without admiration.

Never, I thought to myself, had this primitive method of cutting

a gordian knot been resorted to in such strange and urgent circumstances.

"Heads it is!" he said coolly. "Now, my boy, do you run and I'll crawl after you. If I don't arrive, you know my people's address, and I bequeath to you all my African belongings in memory of a most pleasant trip."

"Don't play the fool," I replied sternly. "Come, put your right arm round my neck and hop on your left leg as you never hopped before."

Then we started, and really our transit was quite lively, for all those Basutos began what for them was rapid firing. I think, however, that their best shots must have fallen, for not a bullet touched us, although before we got out of their range one or two went very near.

"There," said Anscombe, as a last amazing hop brought him to the wagon rail, "there, you see how wise it is give Providence a chance sometimes."

"In the shape of a lucky penny," I grumbled as I hoisted him up.

"Certainly, for why should not Providence inhabit a penny as much as it does any other mundane thing? Oh, my dear Quatermain, have

you never been taught to look to the pence and let the rest take care of itself?"

"Stop talking rubbish and look to your foot, for the wagon is starting," I replied.

Then off we went at a good round trot, for never have I seen oxen more scientifically driven than they were by Footsack and his friends on this occasion, or a greater pace got out of them. As soon as we reached a fairly level piece of ground I made Anscombe lie down on the cartel of the wagon and examined his wound as well as circumstances would allow. I found that the bullet or whatever the missile may have been, had gone through his right instep just beneath the big sinew, but so far as I could judge without injuring any bone. There was nothing to be done except rub in some carbolic ointment, which fortunately he had in his medicine chest, and bind up the wound as best I could with a clean handkerchief, after which I tied a towel, that was not clean, over the whole foot.

By this time evening was coming on, so we ate of such as we had with us, which we needed badly enough, without stopping the wagon. I remember that it consisted of cheese and hard biscuits. At dark we were obliged to halt a little by a stream until the moon rose, which fortunately she did very soon, as she was only just past her full. As soon as she was up we started again, and

with a breathing space or two, trekked all that night, which I spent seated on the after part of the wagon and keeping a sharp look out, while, notwithstanding the roughness of the road and his hurt, Anscombe slept like a child upon the cartel inside.

I was very tired, so tired that the fear of surprise was the only thing that kept me awake, and I recall reflecting in a stupid kind of way, that it seemed always to have been my lot in life to watch thus, in one sense or another, while others slept.

The night passed somehow without anything happening, and at dawn we halted for a while to water the oxen, which we did with buckets, and let them eat what grass they could reach from their yokes, since we did not dare to outspan them. Just as we were starting on again the voortrekker, whom I had set to watch at a little distance, ran up with his eyes bulging out of his head, and reported that he had seen a Basuto with an assegai hanging about in the bush, as though to keep touch with us, after which we delayed no more.

All that day we blundered on, thrashing the weary cattle that at every halt tried to lie down, and by nightfall came to the outspan near to the house called the Temple, where we had met the Kaffirs returning from the diamond fields. This journey we had accomplished in exactly half the time it had taken on the outward trip. Here we were obliged to stop, as our team must have rest

and food. So we outspanned and slept that night without much fear, since I thought it most improbable that the Basutos would attempt to follow us so far, as we were now within a day's trek of Pilgrim's Rest, whither we proposed to proceed on the morrow. But that is just where I made a mistake.