CHAPTER IV

DOCTOR RODD

I did get a little sleep that night, with one eye open, but before dawn I was up again seeing to the feeding of our remaining horse with some mealies that we carried, and other matters. The oxen we had been obliged to unyoke that they might fill themselves with grass and water, since otherwise I feared that we should never get them on to their feet again. As it was, the poor brutes were so tired that some of them could scarcely eat, and all lay down at the first opportunity.

Having awakened Footsack and the other boys that they might be ready to take advantage of the light when it came, for I was anxious to be away, I drank a nip of Hollands and water and ate a biscuit, making Anscombe do the same. Coffee would have been more acceptable, but I thought it wiser not to light a fire for fear of showing our whereabouts.

Now a faint glimmer in the east told me that the dawn was coming. Just by the wagon grew a fair-sized, green-leaved tree, and as it was quite easy to climb even by starlight, up it I went so as to get above the ground mist and take a look round before we trekked. Presently the sky grew pearly and light began to gather; then the edge of the sun appeared, throwing long level rays across the world. Everywhere the mist lay dense as cotton wool, except at one spot about a mile behind us where there was a little hill or rather a wave of the ground, over which we had trekked upon the preceding evening. The top of this rise was above mist level, and on it no trees grew because the granite came to the surface. Having discovered nothing, I called to the boys to drive up the oxen, some of which had risen and were eating again, and prepared to descend from my tree.

As I did so, out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of something that glittered far away, so far that it would only have attracted the notice of a trained hunter. Yes, something was shining on the brow of the rise of which I have spoken. I stared at it through my glasses and saw what I had feared to see. A body of natives was crossing the rise and the glitter was caused by the rays of dawn striking on their spears and gun-barrels.

I came down out of that tree like a frightened wild cat and ran to the wagon, thinking hard as I went. The Basutos were after

us, meaning to attack as soon as there was sufficient light. In ten minutes or less they would be here. There was no time to inspan the oxen, and even if there had been, stiff and weary as the beasts were, we should be overtaken before we had gone a hundred yards on that bad road. What then was to be done? Run for it? It was impossible, Anscombe could not run. My eye fell upon the horse munching the last of his mealies.

"Footsack," I said as quietly as I could, "never mind about inspanning yet, but saddle up the horse. Be quick now."

He looked at me doubtfully, but obeyed, having seen nothing. If he had seen I knew that he would have been off. I nipped round to the end of the wagon, calling to the other two boys to let the oxen be a while and come to me.

"Now, Anscombe," I said, "hand out the rifles and cartridges. Don't stop to ask questions, but do what I tell you. They are on the rack by your side. So. Now put on your revolver and let me help you down. Man, don't forget your hat."

He obeyed quickly enough, and presently was standing on one leg by my side, looking cramped and tottery.

"The Basutos are on us," I said.

He whistled and remarked something about Chapter No. 2.

"Footsack," I called, "bring the horse here; the Baas wishes to ride a little to ease his leg."

He did so, stopping a moment to pull the second girth tight. Then we helped Anscombe into the saddle.

"Which way?" he asked.

I looked at the long slope in front of us. It was steep and bad going. Anscombe might get up it on the horse before the Kaffirs overtook us, but it was extremely problematical if we could do so. I might perhaps if I mounted behind him and the horse could bear us both, which was doubtful, but how about our poor servants? He saw the doubt upon my face and said in his quiet way,

"You may remember that our white-bearded friend told us to make straight for his place in case of any difficulty with the Basutos. It seems to have arisen."

"I know he did," I answered, "but I cannot make up my mind which is the more dangerous, Marnham or the Basutos. I rather think that he set them on to us."

"It is impossible to solve problems at this hour of the morning, Quatermain, and there is no time to toss. So I vote for the Temple."

"It seems our best chance. At any rate that's your choice, so let's go."

Then I sang out to the Kaffirs, "The Basutos are on us. We go to Tampel for refuge. Run!"

My word! they did run. I never saw athletes make better time over the first quarter of a mile. We ran, too, or at least the horse did, I hanging on to the stirrup and Anscombe holding both the rifles beneath his arm. But the beast was tired, also blown out with that morning feed of mealies, so our progress was not very fast. When we were about two hundred yards from the wagon I looked back and saw the Basutos beginning to arrive. They saw us also, and uttering a sort of whistling war cry, started in pursuit.

After this we had quite an interesting time. I scrambled on to the horse behind Anscombe, whereon that intelligent animal, feeling the double weight, reduced its pace proportionately, to a slow tripple, indeed, out of which it could not be persuaded to move. So I slipped off again over its tail and we went on as before. Meanwhile the Basutos, very active fellows, were coming

up. By this time the yellow-wood grove in the swamp, of which I have already written, was close to us, and it became quite a question which of us would get there first (I may mention that Footsack & Co. had already attained its friendly shelter). Anscombe kicked the horse with his sound heel and I thumped it with my fist, thereby persuading it to a hand gallop.

As we reached the outlying trees of the wood the first Basuto, a lank fellow with a mouth like a rat trap, arrived and threw an assegai at us which passed between Anscombe's back and my nose. Then he closed and tried to stab with another assegai. I could do nothing, but Anscombe showed himself cleverer than I expected. Dropping the reins, he drew his pistol and managed to send a bullet through that child of nature's head, so that he went down like a stone.

"And you tell me I am a bad shot," he drawled.

"It was a fluke," I gasped, for even in these circumstances truth would prevail.

"Wait and you'll see," he replied, re-cocking the revolver.

As a matter of fact there was no need for more shooting, since at the verge of the swamp the Basutos pulled up. I do not think that the death of their companion caused them to do this, for

they seemed to take no notice of him. It was as though they had reached some boundary which they knew it would not be lawful for them to pass. They simply stopped, took the dead man's assegai and shield from the body and walked quietly back towards the wagon, leaving him where he lay. The horse stopped also, or rather proceeded at a walk.

"There!" exclaimed Anscombe. "Did I not tell you I had a presentiment that I should kill a man in this accursed wood?"

"Yes," I said as soon as I had recovered my breath, "but you mixed up a woman with the matter and I don't see one."

"That's true," he replied, "I hope we shan't meet her later."

Then we went on as quickly as we could, which was not very fast, for I feared lest the Basutos should change their minds and follow us. As the risk of this became less our spirits rose, since if we had lost the wagon and the oxen, at least we had saved our lives, which was almost more than we could have expected in the circumstances. At last we came to that glade where we had killed the wildebeeste not a week before. There lay its skeleton picked clean by the great brown kites that frequent the bush-veld, some of which still sat about in the trees.

"Well, I suppose we must go on to Tampel," said Anscombe rather

faintly, for I could see that his wound was giving him a good deal of pain.

As he spoke from round the tree whence he had first emerged, appeared Mr. Marnham, riding the same horse and wearing the same clothes. The only difference between his two entries was that the first took place in the late evening and the second in the early morning.

"So here you are again," he said cheerfully.

"Yes," I answered, "and it is strange to meet you at the same spot. Were you expecting us?"

"Not more than I expect many things," he replied with a shrewd glance at me, adding, "I always rise with the sun, and thinking that I heard a shot fired in the distance, came to see what was happening. The Basutos attacked you at daybreak, did they not?"

"They did, but how did you know that, Mr. Marnham?"

"Your servants told me. I met them running to the house looking very frightened. You are wounded, Mr. Anscombe?"

"Yes, a couple of days ago on the border of Sekukuni's country where the natives tried to murder us."

"Ah!" he replied without surprise. "I warned you the trip was dangerous, did I not? Well, come on home where my partner, Rodd, who luckily has had medical experience, will attend to you. Mr. Quatermain can tell me the story as we go."

So we went on up the long slope, I relating our adventures, to which Mr. Marnham listened without comment.

"I expect that the Kaffirs will have looted the wagon and be on the way home with your oxen by now," he said when I had finished.

"Are you not afraid that they will follow us here?" I asked.

"Oh no, Mr. Quatermain. We do business with these people, also they sometimes come to be doctored by Rodd when they are sick, so this place is sacred ground to them. They stopped hunting you when they got to the Yellow-wood swamp where our land begins, did they not?"

"Yes, but now I want to hunt them. Can you give me any help? Those oxen are tired out and footsore, so we might be able to catch them up."

He shook his head. "We have very few people here, and by the time that you could get assistance from the Camp at Barberton, if

the Commandant is able and willing to give you any, which I rather doubt, they will be far away. Moreover," he added, dropping his voice, "let us come to an understanding. You are most welcome to any help or hospitality that I can offer, but if you wish to do more fighting I must ask you to go elsewhere. As I have told you, we are peaceful men who trade with these people, and do not wish to be involved in a quarrel with them, which might expose us to attack or bring us into trouble with the British Government which has annexed but not conquered their country. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly. While we are with you we will do nothing, but afterwards we hold ourselves at liberty to act as we think best."

"Quite so. Meanwhile I hope that you and Mr. Anscombe will make yourselves comfortable with us for as long as you like."

In my own mind I came to the conclusion that this would be for the shortest time possible, but I only said--

"It is most kind of you to take in complete strangers thus. No, not complete," I added, looking towards Anscombe who was following on the tired horse a few paces behind, "for you knew his father, did you not?"

"His father?" he said, lifting his eyebrows. "No. Oh! I

remember, I said something to that effect the other night, but it was a mistake. I mixed up two names, as one often does after a lapse of many years."

"I understand," I answered, but remembering Anscombe's story I reflected to myself that our venerable host was an excellent liar. Or more probably he meant to convey that he wished the subject of his youthful reminiscences to be taboo.

Just then we reached the house which had a pretty patch of well-kept flower-garden in front of it, surrounded by a fence covered with wire netting to keep out buck. By the gate squatted our three retainers, looking very blown and rather ashamed of themselves.

"Your master wishes to thank you for your help in a dark hour, Footsack, and I wish to congratulate you all upon the swiftness of your feet," I said in Dutch.

"Oh! Baas, the Basutos were many and their spears are sharp," he began apologetically.

"Be silent, you running dog," I said, "and go help your master to dismount."

Then we went through the gate, Anscombe leaning on my shoulder

and on that of Mr. Marnham, and up the path which was bordered with fences of the monthly rose, towards the house. Really this was almost as charming to look at near at hand as it had been from far away. Of course the whole thing was crude in detail. Rough, half-shaped blocks of marble from the neighbouring quarry had been built into walls and columns. Nothing was finished, and considered bit by bit all was coarse and ugly. Yet the general effect was beautiful because it was an effect of design, the picture of an artist who did not fully understand the technicalities of painting, the work of a great writer who had as yet no proper skill in words. Never did I see a small building that struck me more. But then what experience have I of buildings, and, as Anscombe reminded me afterwards, it was but a copy of something designed when the world was young, or rather when civilization was young, and man new risen from the infinite ages of savagery, saw beauty in his dreams and tried to symbolize it in shapes of stone.

We came to the broad stoep, to which several rough blocks of marble served as steps. On it in a long chair made of native wood and seated with hide rimpis, sat or rather lolled a man in a dressing-gown who was reading a book. He raised himself as we came and the light of the sun, for the verandah faced to the east, shone full upon his face, so that I saw him well. It was that of a man of something under forty years of age, dark, powerful, and weary--not a good face, I thought. Indeed, it gave

me the impression of one who had allowed the evil which exists in the nature of all of us to become his master, or had even encouraged it to do so.

In the Psalms and elsewhere we are always reading of the righteous and the unrighteous until those terms grow wearisome. It is only of late years that I have discovered, or think that I have discovered, what they mean. Our lives cannot be judged by our deeds; they must be judged by our desires or rather by our moral attitude. It is not what we do so much as what we try to do that counts in the formation of character. All fall short, all fail, but in the end those who seek to climb out of the pit, those who strive, however vainly, to fashion failure to success, are, by comparison, the righteous, while those who are content to wallow in our native mire and to glut themselves with the daily bread of vice, are the unrighteous. To turn our backs thereon wilfully and without cause, is the real unforgiveable sin against the Spirit. At least that is the best definition of the problem at which I in my simplicity can arrive.

Such thoughts have often occurred to me in considering the character of Dr. Rodd and some others whom I have known; indeed the germ of them arose in my mind which, being wearied at the time and therefore somewhat vacant, was perhaps the more open to external impressions, as I looked upon the face of this stranger on the stoep. Moreover, as I am proud to record, I did not judge

him altogether wrongly. He was a blackguard who, under other influences or with a few added grains of self-restraint and of the power of recovery, might have become a good or even a saintly man. But by some malice of Fate or some evil inheritance from an unknown past, those grains were lacking, and therefore he went not up but down the hill.

"Case for you, Rodd," called out Marnham.

"Indeed," he answered, getting to his feet and speaking in a full voice, which, like his partner's, was that of an educated Englishman. "What's the matter. Horse accident?"

Then we were introduced, and Anscombe began to explain his injury.

"Um!" said the doctor, studying him with dark eyes. "Kaffir bullet through the foot some days ago. Ought to be attended to at once. Also you look pretty done, so don't tire yourself with the story, which I can get from Mr. Quatermain. Come and lie down and I'll have a look at you while they are cooking breakfast."

Then he guided us to a room of which the double French windows opened on to the stoep, a very pretty room with two beds in it. Making Anscombe lie down on one of these he turned up his

trouser, undid my rough bandage and examined the wound.

"Painful?" he asked.

"Very," answered Anscombe, "right up to the thigh."

After this he drew off the nether garments and made a further examination.

"Um," he said again, "I must syringe this out. Stay still while I get some stuff."

I followed him from the room, and when we were out of hearing on the stoep inquired what he thought. I did not like the look of that leg.

"It is very bad," he answered, "so bad that I am wondering if it wouldn't be best to remove the limb below the knee and make it a job. You can see for yourself that it is septic and the inflammation is spreading up rapidly."

"Good Heavens!" I exclaimed, "do you fear mortification?"

He nodded. "Can't say what was on that slug or bit of old iron and he hasn't had the best chance since. Mortification, or tetanus, or both, are more than possible. Is he a temperate

man?"

"So far as I know," I answered, and stared at him while he thought. Then he said with decision,

"That makes a difference. To lose a foot is a serious thing; some might think almost as bad as death. I'll give him a chance, but if those symptoms do not abate in twenty-four hours, I must operate. You needn't be afraid, I was house surgeon at a London Hospital--once, and I keep my hand in. Lucky you came straight here."

Having made his preparations and washed his hands, he returned, syringed the wound with some antiseptic stuff, and dressed and bandaged the leg up to the knee. After this he gave Anscombe hot milk to drink, with two eggs broken into it, and told him to rest a while as he must not eat anything solid at present. Then he threw a blanket over him, and, signing to me to come away, let down a mat over the window.

"I put a little something into that milk," he said outside, "which will send him to sleep for a few hours. So we will leave him quiet. Now you'll want a wash."

"Where are you going to take Mr. Quatermain?" asked Marnham who was seated on the stoep.

"Into my room," he answered.

"Why? There's Heda's ready."

"Heda might return at any moment," replied the doctor. "Also Mr. Quatermain had better sleep in Mr. Anscombe's room. He will very likely want some one to look after him at night."

Marnham opened his mouth to speak again, then changed his mind and was silent, as a servant is silent under rebuke. The incident was quite trifling, yet it revealed to me the relative attitude of these two men. Without a doubt Rodd was the master of his partner, who did not even care to dispute with him about the matter of the use of his daughter's bedroom. They were a queer couple who, had it not been for my anxiety as to Anscombe's illness, would have interested me very much, as indeed they were destined to do.

Well, I went to tidy up in the doctor's room, and as he left me alone while I washed, had the opportunity of studying it a little. Like the rest of the house it was lined with native wood which was made to serve as the backs of bookshelves and of cupboards filled with medicines and instruments. The books formed a queer collection. There were medical works, philosophical works, histories, novels, most of them French, and

other volumes of a sort that I imagine are generally kept under lock and key; also some that had to do with occult matters. There was even a Bible. I opened it thoughtlessly, half in idle curiosity, to see whether it was ever used, only to replace it in haste. For at the very page that my eye fell on, I remember it was one of my favourite chapters in Isaiah, was a stamp in violet ink marked H. M.'s Prison--well, I won't say where.

I may state, however, that the clue enabled me in after years to learn an episode in this man's life which had brought about his ruin. There is no need to repeat it or to say more than that gambling and an evil use of his medical knowledge to provide the money to pay his debts, were the cause of his fall. The strange thing is that he should have kept the book which had probably been given to him by the prison chaplain. Still everybody makes mistakes sometimes. Or it may have had associations for him, and of course he had never seen this stamp upon an unread page, which happened to leap to my eye.

Now I was able to make a shrewd guess at his later career. After his trouble he had emigrated and began to practise in South Africa. Somehow his identity had been discovered; his past was dragged up against him, possibly by rivals jealous of his skill; his business went and he found it advisable to retire to the Transvaal before the Annexation, at that time the home of sundry people of broken repute. Even there he did not stop in a town,

but hid himself upon the edge of savagery. Here he foregathered with another man of queer character, Marnham, and in his company entered upon some doubtful but lucrative form of trade while still indulging his love of medicine by doctoring and operating upon natives, over whom he would in this way acquire great influence. Indeed, as I discovered before the day was over, he had quite a little hospital at the back of the house in which were four or five beds occupied by Kaffirs and served by two male native nurses whom he had trained. Also numbers of out-patients visited him, some of whom travelled from great distances, and occasionally, but not often, he attended white people who chanced to be in the neighbourhood.

The three of us breakfasted in a really charming room from the window of which could be studied a view as beautiful as any I know. The Kaffirs who waited were well trained and dressed in neat linen uniforms. The cooking was good; there was real silver on the table, then a strange sight in that part of Africa, and amongst engravings and other pictures upon the walls, hung an oil portrait of a very beautiful young woman with dark hair and eyes.

"Is that your daughter, Mr. Marnham?" I asked.

"No," he replied rather shortly, "it is her mother."

Immediately afterwards he was called from the room to speak to

some one, whereon the doctor said--

"A foreigner as you see, a Hungarian; the Hungarian women are very good looking and very charming."

"So I have understood," I answered, "but does this lady live here?"

"Oh, no. She is dead, or I believe that she is dead. I am not sure, because I make it a rule never to pry into people's private affairs. All I know about her is that she was a beauty whom Marnham married late in life upon the Continent when she was but eighteen. As is common in such cases he was very jealous of her, but it didn't last long, as she died, or I understand that she died, within a year of her daughter's birth. The loss affected him so much that he emigrated to South Africa with the child and began life anew. I do not think that they correspond with Hungary, and he never speaks of her even to his daughter, which suggests that she is dead."

I reflected that all these circumstances might equally well suggest several other things, but said nothing, thinking it wisest not to pursue the subject. Presently Marnham returned and informed me that a native had just brought him word that the Basutos had made off homeward with our cattle, but had left the wagon and its contents quite untouched, not even stealing the

spare guns and ammunition.

"That's luck," I said, astonished, "but extremely strange. How do you explain it, Mr. Marnham?"

He shrugged his shoulders and answered--

"As every one knows, you are a much greater expert in native habits and customs than I am, Mr. Quatermain."

"There are only two things that I can think of," I said. "One is that for some reason or other they thought the wagon tagati, bewitched you know, and that it would bring evil on them to touch it, though this did not apply to the oxen. The other is that they supposed it, but not the oxen, to belong to some friend of their own whose property they did not wish to injure."

He looked at me sharply but said nothing, and I went on to tell them the details of the attack that had been made upon us, adding--

"The odd part of the affair is that one of those Basutos called out to us that some infernal scoundrel of a white had warned Sekukuni of our coming and that he had ordered them to take our guns and cattle. This Basuto, who was wounded and praying for mercy, was drowned before he could tell me who the white man

was."

"A Boer, I expect," said Marnham quietly. "As you know they are not particularly well affected towards us English just now. Also I happen to be aware that some of them are intriguing with Sekukuni against the British through Makurupiji, his 'Mouth' or prime-minister, a very clever old scamp who likes to have two stools to sit on."

"And doubtless will end by falling between them. Well, you see, now that I think of it, the wounded Kaffir only said that they were ordered to take our guns and oxen, and incidentally our lives. The wagon was not mentioned."

"Quite so, Mr. Quatermain. I will send some of our boys to help your servants to bring everything it contains up here."

"Can't you lend me a team of oxen," I asked, "to drag it to the house?"

"No, we have nothing but young cattle left. Both red-water and lung-sickness have been so bad this season that all the horned stock have been swept out of the country. I doubt whether you could beg, borrow or steal a team of oxen this side of Pretoria, except from some of the Dutchmen who won't part."

"That's awkward. I hoped to be able to trek in a day or two."

"Your friend won't be able to trek for a good many days at the best," broke in the doctor, who had been listening unconcernedly, "but of course you could get away on the horse after it has rested."

"You told me you left a span of oxen at Pretoria," said Marnham. "Why not go and fetch them here, or if you don't like to leave Mr. Anscombe, send your driver and the boys."

"Thanks for the idea. I will think it over," I answered.

That morning after Footsack and the voorlooper had been sent with some of the servants from the Temple to fetch up the contents of the wagon, for I was too tired to accompany them, having found that Anscombe was still asleep, I determined to follow his example. Finding a long chair on the stoep, I sat down and slumbered in it sweetly for hours. I dreamt of all sorts of things, then through my dreams it seemed to me that I heard two voices talking, those of our Marnham and Rodd, not on the stoep, but at a distance from it. As a matter of fact they were talking, but so far away that in my ordinary waking state I could never have heard them. My own belief is that the senses, and I may add the semi-spiritual part of us, are much more acute when we lie half bound in the bonds of sleep, than when we are what is

called wide awake. Doubtless when we are quite bound they attain the limits of their power and, I think, sail at times to the uttermost ends of being. But unhappily of their experiences we remember nothing when we awake. In half sleep it is different; then we do retain some recollection.

In this curious condition of mind it seemed to me that Rodd said to Marnham--

"Why have you brought these men here?"

"I did not bring them here," he answered. "Luck, Fate, Fortune, God or the Devil, call it what you will, brought them here, though if you had your wish, it is true they would never have come. Still, as they have come, I am glad. It is something to me, living in this hell, to get a chance of talking to English gentlemen again before I die."

"English gentlemen," remarked Rodd reflectively, "Well, Anscombe is of course, but how about that other hunter? After all, in what way is he better than the scores of other hunters and Kaffir traders and wanderers whom one meets in this strange land?"

"In what way indeed?" thought I to myself, in my dream.

"If you can't see, I can't explain to you. But as I happen to

know, the man is of blood as good as mine--and a great deal better than yours," he added with a touch of insolence. "Moreover, he has an honest name among white and black, which is much in this country."

"Yes," replied the doctor in the same reflective voice, "I agree with you, I let him pass as a gentleman. But I repeat, Why did you bring them here when with one more word it would have been so easy--" and he stopped.

"I have told you, it was not I. What are you driving at?"

"Do you think it is exactly convenient, especially when we are under the British flag again, to have two people who, we both admit, are English gentlemen, that is, clean, clear-eyed men, considering us and our affairs for an indefinite period, just because you wish for the pleasure of their society? Would it not have been better to tell those Basutos to let them trek on to Pretoria?"

"I don't know what would have been better. I repeat, what are you driving at?

"Heda is coming home in a day or two; she might be here any time," remarked Rodd as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Yes, because you made me write and say that I wanted her. But what of that?"

"Nothing in particular, except that I am not sure that I wish her to associate with 'an English gentleman' like this Anscombe."

Marnham laughed scornfully. "Ah! I understand," he said. "Too clean and straight. Complications might ensue and the rest of it. Well, I wish to God they would, for I know the Anscombes, or used to, and I know the genus called Rodd."

"Don't be insulting; you may carry the thing too far one day, and whatever I have done I have paid for. But you've not paid--yet."

"The man is very ill. You are a skilled doctor. If you're afraid of him, why don't you kill him?" asked Marnham with bitter scorn.

"There you have me," replied Rodd. "Men may shed much, but most of them never shed their professional honour. I shall do my honest best to cure Mr. Anscombe, and I tell you that he will take some curing."

Then I woke up, and as no one was in sight, wondered whether or no I had been dreaming. The upshot of it was that I made up my

mind to send Footsack to Pretoria for the oxen, not to go myself.