

## CHAPTER III

### AFTER SEVEN YEARS

"What is the time, Leonard?"

"Eleven o'clock, Tom."

"Eleven--already? I shall go at dawn, Leonard. You remember Johnston died at dawn, and so did Askew."

"For heaven's sake don't speak like that, Tom! If you think you are going to die, you will die."

The sick man laughed a ghost of a laugh--it was half a death-rattle.

"It is no use talking, Leonard; I feel my life flaring and sinking like a dying fire. My mind is quite clear now, but I shall die at dawn for all that. The fever has burnt me up! Have I been raving, Leonard?"

"A little, old fellow," answered Leonard.

"What about?"

"Home mostly, Tom."

"Home! We have none, Leonard; it is sold. How long have we been away now?"

"Seven years."

"Seven years! Yes. Do you remember how we said good-bye to the old place on that winter night after the auction? And do you remember what we resolved?"

"Yes."

"Repeat it."

"We swore that we would seek wealth enough to buy Outram back till we won it or died, and that we would never return to England till it was won. Then we sailed for Africa. For seven years we have sought and done no more than earn a livelihood, much less a couple of hundred thousand pounds or so."

"Leonard."

"Yes, Tom?"

"You are sole heir to our oath now, and to the old name with it, or you will be in a few hours. I have fulfilled my vow. I have sought till I died. You will take up the quest till you succeed or die. The struggle

has been mine, may you live to win the Star. You will persevere, will you not, Leonard?"

"Yes, Tom, I will."

"Give me your hand on it, old fellow."

Leonard Outram knelt down beside his dying brother, and they clasped each other's hands.

"Now let me sleep awhile. I am tired. Do not be afraid, I shall wake before the--end."

Hardly had the words passed his lips when his eyes closed and he sank into stupor or sleep.

His brother Leonard sat down upon a rude seat, improvised out of an empty gin-case. Without the tempest shrieked and howled, the great wind shook the Kaffir hut of grass and wattle, piercing it in a hundred places till the light of the lantern wavered within its glass, and the sick man's hair was lifted from his clammy brow. From time to time fierce squalls of rain fell like sheets of spray, and the water, penetrating the roof of grass, streamed to the earthen floor. Leonard crept on his hands and knees to the doorway of the hut, or rather to the low arched opening which served as a doorway, and, removing the board that secured it, looked out at the night. Their hut stood upon the ridge

of a great mountain; below was a sea of bush, and around it rose the fantastic shapes of other mountains. Black clouds drove across the dying moon, but occasionally she peeped out and showed the scene in all its vast solemnity and appalling solitude.

Presently Leonard closed the opening of the doorway, and going back to his brother's side he gazed upon him earnestly. Many years of toil and privation had not robbed Thomas Outram's face of its singular beauty, or found power to mar its refinement. But death was written on it.

Leonard sighed, then, struck by a sudden thought, sought for and found a scrap of looking-glass. Holding it close to the light of the lantern, he examined the reflection of his own features. The glass mirrored a handsome bearded man, dark, keen-eyed like one who is always on the watch for danger, curly-haired and broad-shouldered; not very tall, but having massive limbs and a form which showed strength in every movement. Though he was still young, there was little of youth left about the man; clearly toil and struggle had done an evil work with him, ageing his mind and hardening it as they had hardened the strength and vigour of his body. The face was a good one, but most men would have preferred to see friendship shining in those piercing black eyes rather than the light of enmity. Leonard was a bad enemy, and his long striving with the world sometimes led him to expect foes where they did not exist.

Even now this thought was in his mind: "He is dying," he said to himself, as he laid down the glass with the care of a man who cannot

afford to hazard a belonging however trivial, "and yet his face is not so changed as mine is. My God! he is dying! My brother--the only man--the only living creature I love in the world, except one perhaps, if indeed I love her still. Everything is against us--I should say against me now, for I cannot count him. Our father was our first enemy; he brought us into the world, neglected us, squandered our patrimony, dishonoured our name, and shot himself. And since then what has it been but one continual fight against men and nature? Even the rocks in which I dig for gold are foes--victorious foes--" and he glanced at his hands, scarred and made unshapely by labour. "And the fever, that is a foe. Death is the only friend, but he won't shake hands with me. He takes my brother whom I love as he has taken the others, but me he leaves."

Thus mused Leonard sitting sullenly on the red box, his elbow on his knee, his rough hands held beneath his chin pushing forward the thick black beard till it threw a huge shadow, angular and unnatural, on to the wall of the hut, while without the tempest now raved, now lulled, and now raved again. An hour--two--passed and still he sat not moving, watching the face of the fever-stricken man that from time to time flushed and was troubled, then grew pale and still. It seemed to him as though by some strange harmony of nature the death-smitten blood was striving to keep pace with the beat of the storm, knowing that presently life and storm would pass together into the same domain of silence.

At length Tom Outram opened his eyes and looked at him, but Leonard knew that he did not see him as he was. The dying eyes studied him indeed and

were intelligent, but he could feel that they read something on his face that was not known to himself, nor could be visible to any other man--read it as though it were a writing.

So strange was this scrutiny, so meaningless and yet so full of a meaning which he could not grasp, that Leonard shrank beneath it. He spoke to his brother, but no answer came,--only the great hollow eyes read on in that book which was printed upon his face; that book, sealed to him, but to the dying man an open writing.

The sight of the act of death is always terrible; it is terrible to watch the latest wax and ebb of life, and with the intelligence to comprehend that these flickerings, this coming and this going, these sinkings and these last recoveries are the trial flights of the animating and eternal principle--call it soul or what you will--before it trusts itself afar. Still more terrible is it under circumstances of physical and mental desolation such as those present to Leonard Outram in that hour.

But he had looked on death before, on death in many dreadful shapes, and yet he had never been so much afraid. What was it that his brother, or the spirit of his brother, read in his face? What learning had he gathered in that sleep of his, the last before the last? He could not tell--now he longed to know, now he was glad not to know, and now he strove to overcome his fears.

"My nerves are shattered," he said to himself. "He is dying. How shall I bear to see him die?"

A gust of wind shook the hut, rending the thatch apart, and through the rent a little jet of rain fell upon his brother's forehead and ran down his pallid cheeks like tears. Then the strange understanding look passed from the wide eyes, and once more they became human, and the lips were opened.

"Water," they murmured.

Leonard gave him to drink, with one hand holding the pannikin to his brother's mouth and with the other supporting the dying head. Twice he gulped at it, then with a brusque motion of his wasted arm he knocked the cup aside, spilling the water on the earthen floor.

"Leonard," he said, "you will succeed."

"Succeed in what, Tom?"

"You will get the money and Outram--and found the family afresh--but you will not do it alone. A woman will help you."

Then his mind wandered a little and he muttered, "How is Jane? Have you heard from Jane?" or some such words.

At the mention of this name Leonard's face softened, then once more grew hard and anxious.

"I have not heard of Jane for years, old fellow," he said; "probably she is dead or married. But I do not understand."

"Don't waste time, Leonard," Tom answered, rousing himself from his lethargy. "Listen to me. I am going fast. You know dying men see far--sometimes. I dreamed it, or I read it in your face. I tell you--you will die at Outram. Stay here a while after I am dead. Stay a while, Leonard!"

He sank back exhausted, and at that moment a gust of wind, fiercer than any which had gone before, leapt down the mountain gorges, howling with all the voices of the storm. It caught the frail hut and shook it. A cobra hidden in the thick thatch awoke from its lethargy and fell with a soft thud to the floor not a foot from the face of the dying man--then erected itself and hissed aloud with flickering tongue and head swollen by rage. Leonard started back and seized a crowbar which stood near, but before he could strike, the reptile sank down and, drawing its shining shape across his brother's forehead, once more vanished into the thatch.

His eyes did not so much as close, though Leonard saw a momentary reflection of the bright scales in the dilated pupils and shivered at this added terror, shivered as though his own flesh had shrunk beneath the touch of those deadly coils. It was horrible that the snake should



creep across his brother's face, it was still more horrible that his brother, yet living, should not understand the horror. It caused him to remember our invisible companion, that ancient enemy of mankind of whom the reptile is an accepted type; it made him think of that long sleep which the touch of such as this has no power to stir.

Ah! now he was going--it was impossible to mistake that change, the last quick quiver of the blood, followed by an ashen pallor, and the sob of the breath slowly lessening into silence. So the day had died last night, with a little purpling of the sky--a little sobbing of the wind--then ashen nothingness and silence. But the silence was broken, the night had grown alive indeed--and with a fearful life. Hark! how the storm yelled! those blasts told of torment, that rain beat like tears. What if his brother----He did not dare to follow the thought home.

Hark! how the storm yelled!--the very hut wrenched at its strong supports as though the hands of a hundred savage foes were dragging it. It lifted--by heaven it was gone!--gone, crashing down the rocks on the last hurricane blast of the tempest, and there above them lowered the sullen blue of the passing night flecked with scudding clouds, and there in front of them, to the east and between the mountains, flared the splendours of the dawn.

Something had struck Leonard heavily, so heavily that the blood ran down his face; he did not heed it, he scarcely felt it; he only clasped his brother in his arms and, for the first time for many years, he kissed

him on the brow, staining it with the blood from his wound.

The dying man looked up. He saw the glory in the East. Now it ran along the mountain sides, now it burned upon their summits, to each summit a pillar of flame, a peculiar splendour of its own diversely shaped; and now the shapes of fire leaped from earth to heaven, peopling the sky with light. The dull clouds caught the light, but they could not hold it all: back it fell to earth again, and the forests lifted up their arms to greet it, and it shone upon the face of the waters.

Thomas Outram saw--and staggering to his knees he stretched out his arms towards the rising sun, muttering with his lips.

Then he sank upon Leonard's breast, and presently all his story was told.