

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST VIGIL

For a while Leonard sat by the body of his brother. The daylight grew and gathered about him, the round ball of the sun appeared above the mountains.

The storm was gone. Were it not for some broken fragments of the vanished hut, it would have been difficult to know even that it had been. Insects began to chirrup, lizards ran from the crevices of the rocks, yonder the rain-washed bud of a mountain lily opened before his eyes. Still Leonard sat on, his face stony with grief, till at length a shadow fell upon him from above. He looked up--it was cast by a vulture's wings, as they hurried to the place of death.

Grasping his loaded rifle Leonard sprang to his feet. Nearer and nearer came the bird, wheeling above him in lessening circles: it forgot the presence of the living in its desire for the dead. Leonard lifted the rifle, aimed and fired. The report rang out clearly on the silent air, and was echoed from krantz and kloof and mountain side, and from above answered the thud of the bullet. For a moment the smitten bird swayed upon its wide pinions, then they seemed to crumple beneath its weight, and it fell heavily and lay flapping and striking at the stones with its strong beak.

"I also can kill," said Leonard to himself as he watched it die. "Kill till you are killed--that is the law of life." Then he turned to the body of his brother and made it ready for burial as best he might, closing the eyes, tying up the chin with a band of twisted grass, and folding the thin toil-worn hands upon the quiet heart.

When all was finished he paused from his dreadful task, and a thought struck him.

"Where are those Kaffirs?" he said aloud--the sound of his voice seemed to dull the edge of solitude--"the lazy hounds, they ought to have been up an hour ago. Hi! Otter, Otter!"

The mountains echoed "Otter, Otter;" there was no other reply. Again he shouted without result. "I don't like to leave it," he said, "but I must go and see;" and, having covered the body with a red blanket to scare away the vultures, he started at a run round some projecting rocks that bordered the little plateau on which the hut had stood. Beyond them the plateau continued, and some fifty paces from the rocks was a hollow in the mountain side, where a softer vein of stone had been eaten away by centuries of weather.

It was here that the Kaffirs slept--four of them--and in front of this cave or grotto it was their custom to make a fire for cooking. But on that morning no fire was burning, and no Kaffirs were to be seen.

"Still asleep," was Leonard's comment as he strode swiftly towards the cave. In another moment he was in it shouting "Otter, Otter!" and saluting with a vigorous kick a prostrate form, of which he could just see the outline. The form did not move, which was strange, for such a kick should have sufficed to wake even the laziest Basuto from his soundest sleep. Leonard stopped to examine it, and the next moment started back violently, exclaiming:

"Great heavens! it is Cheat, and he is dead."

At this moment a thick voice spoke from the corner of the cave in Dutch, the voice of Otter:

"I am here, Baas, but I am tied: the Baas must loosen me, I cannot stir."

Leonard advanced, striking a match as he came. Presently it burned up, and he saw the man Otter lying on his back, his legs and arms bound firmly with rimpis of hide, his face and body a mass of contusions. Drawing his hunting-knife Leonard cut the rimpis and brought the man from out the cave, carrying rather than leading him.

Otter was a knob-nosed Kaffir, that is of the Bastard Zulu race.

The brothers had found him wandering about the country in a state of semi-starvation, and he had served them faithfully for some years.

They had christened him Otter, his native patronymic being quite

unpronounceable, because of his extraordinary skill in swimming, which almost equalled that of the animal after which he was named.

In face the man was hideous, though his ugliness was not unpleasant, being due chiefly to a great development of his tribal feature, the nose, and in body he was misshapen to the verge of monstrosity. In fact Otter was a dwarf, measuring little more than four feet in height. But what he lacked in height he made up in breadth; it almost seemed as though, intended by nature to be a man of many inches, he had been compressed to his present dimensions by art. His vast chest and limbs, indicating strength nearly superhuman, his long iron arms and massive head, all gave colour to this idea. Otter had one redeeming feature, however--his eyes, that when visible, which at this moment was not the case, were large, steady, and, like his skin, of a brilliant black.

"What has happened?" said Leonard, also speaking in Dutch.

"This, Baas! Last night those three Basuto villains, your servants, made up their minds to desert. They told me nothing, and they were so cunning that, though I watched even their thoughts, I never guessed. They knew better than to tell me, for I would have beaten them--yes, all! So they waited till I was sound asleep, then came behind me, the three of them, and tied me fast that I should not hinder them and that they might take away Baas Tom's gun which you lent me, and other things. Soon I found out their plans, and though I laughed in their faces, oh! my heart was black with rage.

"When the Basuto dogs had tied me they mocked me, calling me foul names and saying that I might stop and starve with the white fools, my masters, who always dug for yellow iron and found so little, being fools. Then they got together everything of value, yes, down to the kettle, and made ready to go, and each of them came and slapped me on the face, and one burnt me here upon the nose with a hot brand.

"All this I bore as a man must bear trouble which comes from the skies, but when Cheat took up Baas Tom's gun and the others came with a reim to tie me to the rock, I could bear it no more. So I shouted aloud and drove at Cheat, who held the gun. Ah! they had forgotten that if my arms are strong, my head is stronger! Butting like a bull I caught him fair in the middle, and his back was against the side of the cave. He made one noise, no more; he will never make another noise, for my head smashed him up inside and the rock hurt me through him. Then the other two hit me with kerries--great blows--and my arms being tied I could not defend myself, though I knew that they would soon kill me; so I groaned and dropped down, pretending to be dead--just like a stink-cat.

"At last, thinking that they had finished me, the Basutos ran away in a great hurry, for they feared lest you might hear the shouting and should come after them with rifles. They were so much afraid that they left the gun and most of the other things. After that I fainted; it was silly, but those kerries of theirs are of rhinoceros horn--I should not have minded so much had they been of wood, but the horn bites deep. That is

all the story. It will please Baas Tom to know that I saved his gun. When he hears it he will forget his sickness and say 'Well done Otter! Ha! Otter, your head is hard.'"

"Make your heart hard also," said Leonard with a sad smile; "Baas Tom is dead. He died at daybreak in my arms. The fever killed him as it killed the other Inkoosis (chiefs)."

Otter heard, and, letting his bruised head fall upon his mighty chest, remained for a while in silence. At length he lifted it, and Leonard saw two tears wandering down the battered countenance. "Wow," he said, "is it so? Oh! my father, are you dead, you who were brave like a lion and gentle as a girl? Yes, you are dead, my ears have heard it, and were it not for your brother, the Baas Leonard, I think that I would kill myself and follow you. Wow, my father, are you indeed dead, who smiled upon me yesterday?"

"Come," said Leonard; "I dare not leave him long."

And he went, Otter following him with a reeling gait, for he was weak from his injuries. Presently they reached the spot, and Otter saw that the hut was gone.

"Certainly," he said, "our bad spirits were abroad last night. Well, next time it will be the turn of the good ones." Then he drew near to the corpse and saluted it with uplifted hand and voice.

"Chief and Father," he said in Zulu, for Otter had wandered long and knew many tongues, but he loved the Zulu best of all. "While you lived upon earth, you were a good man and brave, though somewhat quick of temper and quarrelsome like a woman. Now you have wearied of this world and flown away like an eagle towards the sun, and there where you live in the light of the sun you will be braver and better yet, and become more patient and not quarrel any more with those who are less clever than you. Chief and Father, I salute you! May he whom you named the Otter serve you and the Inkoosi your brother once more in the House of the Great-Great, if one so ugly and misshapen can enter there. As for the Basuto dog whom I slew and who would have stolen your gun, I see now that I killed him in a fortunate hour, that he might be the slave beneath your feet in the House of the Great-Great. Ah! had I known, I would have sent a better man, for there as here Cheat will still be Cheat. Hail, my father! Hail and farewell! Let your spirit watch over us and be gentle towards us, who love you yet."

And Otter turned away without further ado; and having washed his wounds, he set himself to the task of preparing such coarse food as they had in store.

When it was ready Leonard ate of it, and after he had finished eating, together they bore the body to the little cave for shelter. It was Leonard's purpose to bury his brother at sundown; he might not delay longer, but till then he would watch by him, keeping the last of many

vigils. So all that remained of the Basuto Cheat having been dragged forth and thrust unceremoniously into an ant-bear hole by Otter, who while he disposed of the body did not spare to taunt the spirit of his late treacherous foe, the corpse of Thomas Outram was laid in its place, and Leonard sat himself by its side in the gloom of the cave.

About midday Otter, who had been sleeping off his sorrows, physical and mental, came into the cavern. They were short of meat, he said, and with the leave of the Baas he would take the gun of the dead Baas and try to shoot a buck.

Leonard bade him go, but to be back by sundown, as he should require his help.

"Where shall we dig a hole, Baas?" asked the dwarf.

"One is dug," answered Leonard; "he who is dead dug it himself as the others did. We will bury him in the last pit he made looking for gold, to the right of where the hut stood. It is deep and ready."

"Yes, Baas, a good place--though perhaps Baas Tom would not have worked at it so strongly had he known. Wow! Who knows to what end he labours? But perchance it is a little near the donga. Twice that hole has been flooded while Baas Tom was digging in it. Then he would jump out, but now----"

"I have settled it," said Leonard shortly; "go, and be back half an hour before sundown at latest. Stop! Bring some of those rock-lilies if you can. The Baas was fond of them."

The dwarf saluted and went. "Ah!" he said to himself as he waddled down the hill where he hoped to find game, "ah! you do not fear men dead or living--overmuch; yet, Otter, it is true that you are better here in the sun, though the sun is hot, than yonder in the cave. Say, Otter, why does Baas Tom look so awful now that he is dead--he who was so gentle while yet he lived? Cheat did not look awful, only uglier. But then you killed Cheat, and the Heavens killed Baas Tom and set their own seal upon him. And what will Baas Leonard do now that his brother is dead and the Basutos have run away? Go on digging for the yellow iron which is so hard to find, and of which, when it is found, no man can even make a spear? Nay, what is that to you, Otter? What the Baas does you do--and here be the spoor of an impala buck."

Otter was right. The day was fearfully hot. It was summer in East Africa, or rather autumn, the season of fever, thunder and rain, a time that none who valued their lives would care to spend in those latitudes searching for gold with poor food and but little shelter. But men who seek their fortunes are not chary of hazarding their own lives of those of others. They become fatalists, not avowedly perhaps, but unconsciously. Those who are destined to die must die, they think, the others will live. And, after all, it does not greatly matter which they do, for, as they know well, the world will never miss them.

When Leonard Outram, his brother, and two companions in adventure heard from the natives that at a particular spot on the mountains, nominally in the Portuguese territory near the lowest branch of the Zambesi, gold could be dug out like iron ore, and when, at the price of two Tower muskets and a half-bred greyhound, they received a concession from the actual chief of that territory to dig up and possess the gold without let or hindrance from any person whatsoever, they did not postpone their undertaking because the country was fever-stricken and the unhealthy season drew on. In the first place, their resources were not great at the moment; and in the second, they feared lest some other enterprising person with three Tower muskets and two grey-hounds should persuade the chief to rescind their concession in his favour.

So they journeyed laboriously to the place of hidden wealth, and with the help of such native labour as they could gather began their search. At first they were moderately successful; indeed, wherever they dug they found "colour," and once or twice stumbled upon pockets of nuggets. Their hopes ran high, but presently one of the four--Askew by name--sickened and died of fever. They buried him and persevered with varying luck. Then a second member of their party, Johnston, was taken ill. He lingered for a month and died also.

After this Leonard was for abandoning the enterprise, but, as fate would have it, on the day following Johnston's death they found gold in very promising quantities, and his brother, whose desire to win the wealth

necessary was only increased by many disappointments, would not listen to such advice.

So they rebuilt the hut on a higher and healthier spot and stayed. But on one unfortunate day Thomas Outram went out shooting, and losing his path in the bush was forced to spend a night in the fever-fog. A week afterwards he complained of sickness and pains in the back and head--three weeks later he died as we have seen.

All these events and many others antecedent passed through Leonard's mind as he wore out the long hours seated by the side of his dead brother. Never before had he felt so lonely, so utterly desolate, so bankrupt of all love and hope. It was a fact that at this moment he had no friend in the wide world, unless he could call the knob-nosed native Otter a friend. He had been many years away from England, his few distant relations there troubled themselves no more about him or his brother, outcasts, wanderers in strange lands, and his school and college companions in all probability had forgotten his existence.

There was one indeed, Jane Beach. But since that night of parting, seven years ago, he had heard nothing of her. Twice he had written, but no answer came to his letters. Then he gave up writing, for Leonard was a proud man; moreover he guessed that she did not reply because she could not. As he had said to his brother, Jane might be dead by now, or more probably married to Mr. Cohen. And yet once they had loved each other, and to this hour he still loved her, or thought that he did. At least,

through all the weary years of exile, labour, and unceasing search after the unattainable, her image and memory had been with him, a distant dream of sweetness, peace, and beauty, and they were with him yet, though nothing of her remained to him except the parting gift of her prayer-book and the lock of hair within it. The wilderness is not a place where men can forget their earliest love. No, he was alone, absolutely and utterly alone, a wanderer in wild lands, a sojourner with rough unlettered men and savages.

And now, what should he do? This place was played out. There was alluvial gold indeed, but Leonard knew to-day that it was not in the earth, but in the veins of quartz which permeated the mountains, that the real wealth must be sought for, and how could he extract it from the quartz without machinery or capital? Besides, his Kaffir servants had deserted him, worn out with hard work and fever, and there were no others to be had at this season. Well, it was only one more disappointment; he must go back to Natal and take his chance. At the worst he could always earn his living as a transport-rider, and at the best he wearied of this search for wealth which was to build up their family afresh.

Then of a sudden Leonard remembered what he had promised--to go on seeking till he died. Very good, he would keep the promise--till he died. And he remembered also that curious prophecy to which Thomas had given utterance on the previous night, that prophecy of wealth which should come to him.

Of course it was nothing but the distraught fancy of a dying man. For many years his brother had brooded over this possibility of gaining riches, not for their own sake indeed, but that it might be the means of restoring the ancient family, which their father had brought to shame and ruin. It was not wonderful in a man of his excitable temperament that at the hour of his death he should have grasped at some vision of attainment of the object of his life, though by the hand of another. And yet how strangely he had looked at him! With what conviction he had spoken! But all this was beside the point; he, Leonard, had sworn an oath many years ago, and only last night he had promised to continue to observe that oath. Therefore, come good or ill, he must pursue it to the end.

Thus he mused till he grew weary as he sat hour after hour by the side of that rigid thing, which had been his playmate, his brother, and his friend. From time to time he rose and walked about the cave. As the afternoon waned the air grew hotter and stiller, while a great cloud gathered on the horizon.

"There will be thunder at sundown," said Leonard aloud; "I wish that Otter would come back, so that we might get the funeral over; otherwise we shall have to wait till to-morrow."

At length, about half an hour before nightfall, the dwarf appeared at the mouth of the cave, looking more like a gnome than a man against the

lurid background of the angry sky. A buck was tied across his enormous shoulders, and in his hand he held a large bunch of the fragrant mountain lilies.

Then the two of them buried Thomas Outram, there in his lonely grave which he himself had dug by the gully, and the roll of the thunder was his requiem. It seemed a fitting termination to his stormy and laborious life.