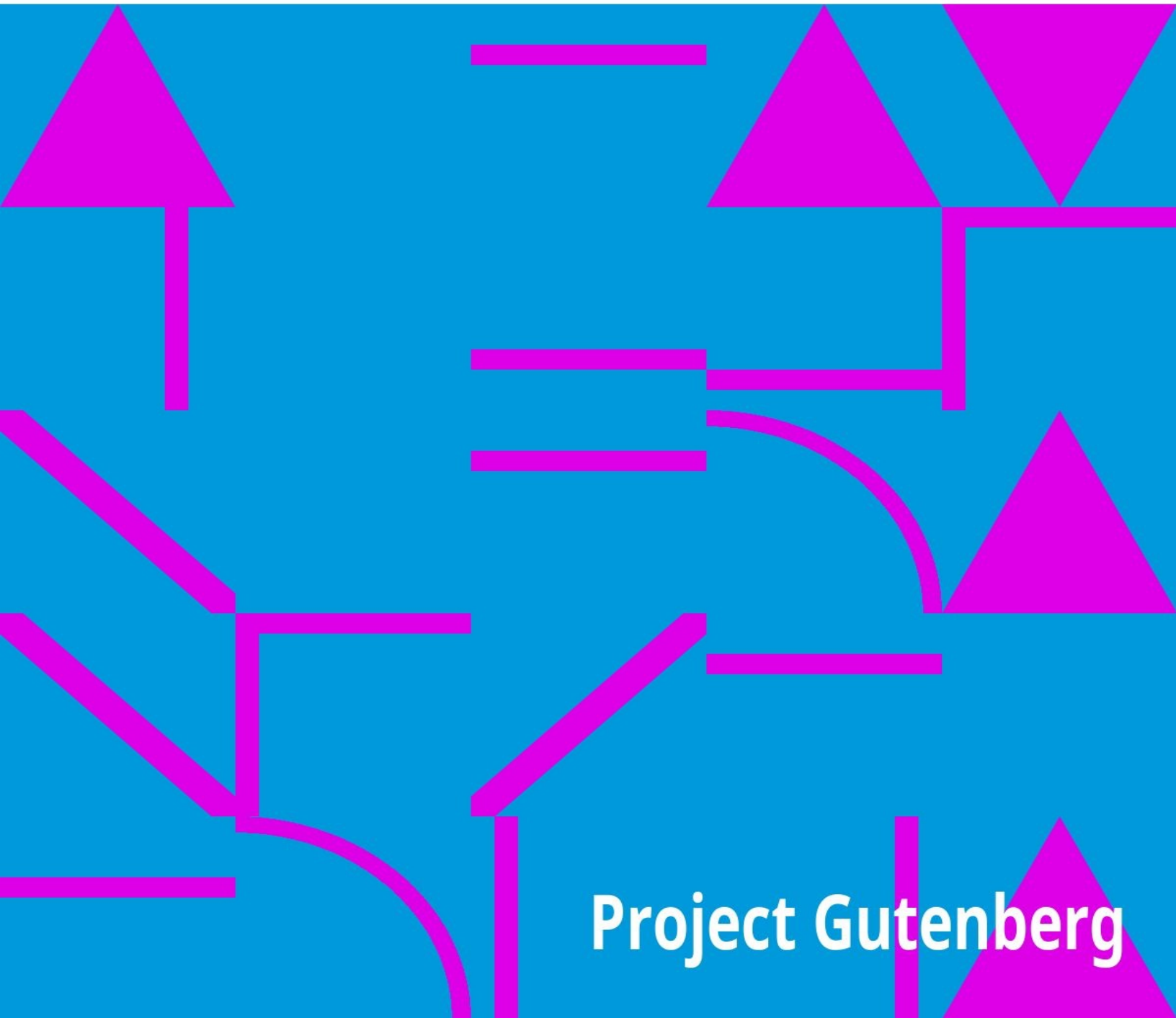
A Dash from Diamond City

George Manville Fenn



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"A Dash from Diamond City"

Chapter One.

Three White Ones.

Tick, *tap, tap—tap, ticker—ticker—tapper—tapper*; *tick—teck, tacker—tap* went a typewriting machine, and *scratch—scratch* went two pens, in one of the minor offices connected with that vast wealth-producing industry known as the De Beers Diamond-Mines, where, seated at desk and table, three young men were hard at work, one manipulating the typewriter, one writing a letter, and the third making entries in a fat leather-covered book with broad bands and a big letter distinguishing it upon the back.

The words: “minor office in a diamond-mine,” naturally suggest wealth, Turkey carpets, french-polished furniture, and plate-glass; but the office in question was an example of simplicity, for its walls were mud and its roof corrugated-iron, while the roughness of the interior was only slightly softened down by a lining of what a carpenter calls matchboarding. In spite of its vast wealth, Kimberley is still little better than a moving camp, and holds out few prospects of ever becoming a magnificent town.

The interior of that newly-created office, allowing for the tapping of the typewriter and the scratching of the pens, was very quiet; but outside there was the strange sound produced by the mingling of voices with trampling feet and the distant whirr and rattle of machinery, till a clock began striking, followed by the clangour of a bell, and then all was changed.

“Time!” shouted the manipulator of the typewriter, springing from his stool to stretch his wiry six feet of length, at the same time spoiling a keen, manly face by distorting it with a yawn. The clerk who had been bending over the thick account-book ceased making entries, applied the blotting-paper, and closed the book with a bang, to turn round and display a pink-and-white, fat, smooth face, disfigured by nearly white eyebrows and

lashes and curly whitey-brown hair. As he stood up he yawned and wrinkled his fat face a good deal; but the wrinkles died down into a smile which gave him a meek and mild appearance, the said smile being doubled directly after by his taking a little round shaving-glass out of his desk, propping it up by means of a contrivance behind, and then, by the help of a pocket-comb, proceeding to rearrange his hair, which, from the resistance offered, appeared to be full of knots and kinks.

The last to leave his desk was a manly-looking young fellow who appeared to be twenty, but who possessed documentary evidence that he was only eighteen. He neither stretched nor yawned, but drew himself up with a sigh of relief, and, after carefully locking up the letters he had written, he turned to the typist.

“Going out, Ingleborough?” he said.

“Yes; I shan’t be long. I must go on to the compound. Back in—”

“Five minutes?” dashed in his questioner.

“No; that I shan’t,” said the young man smartly; “but I will not exceed fifteen. Get out my rifle and belts, West.”

“All right,” was the reply, and as the door closed the young clerk crossed to a plain deal cupboard in the corner of the office, threw open the broad door, and revealed an arms-rack with some twenty of the newest-pattern rifles standing ready for use, and bayonets and bandoliers to match each breech-loading piece.

A peculiarly innocent baby-like look came over his companion’s face as he opened his desk and took out a little flat oblong mahogany case and said softly:

“Going to play at soldiers again? Only to think of Oliver West, Esquire, learning to shoulder arms and right-about face when a drill-sergeant barks at him.”

“Look here, Anson,” cried the young fellow warmly; “is that meant for a sneer?”

“Me sneer?” protested the plump-looking cherubic clerk. “Oh dear, no! I never indulge in sneers, and I never quarrel, and I never fight.”

“Humph!” ejaculated the rifle-bearer.

“I only think it’s all braggadocio nonsense for a lot of fellows to go wasting time drilling and volunteering when they might acquire such an accomplishment as this.”

As the speaker addressed his warlike companion he tapped the lid of his case, opened it, and revealed three joints of a flute lying snugly in purple-velvet fittings, and, taking them out, he proceeded to lick the ends all round in a tomcat sort of way, and screwed them together, evidently with a great deal of satisfaction to himself, for he smiled softly.

“Bah! It’s a deal more creditable to be prepared to defend the place against the Boers. Better join us, Anson.”

“Me? No, thank you, unless you start a band and make me bandmaster.”

“We shall want no music,” said West, laughing. “The Boers will give us plenty of that with their guns.”

“Nonsense! It’s all fudge,” said the flautist, smiling. “There’ll be no fighting, and even if there were I’m not going to shoulder a rifle. I should be afraid to let it off.”

“You?” cried West, staring into the smooth, plump face. “Why, you once told me you were a first-rate shot.”

“Did I? Well, it was only my fun,” said the clerk, placing his flute to his lips and beginning to run dumb scales up and down, skilfully enough as to the fingering, but he did not produce a sound.

“I say, don’t you begin to blow!” cried West, looking rather contemptuously at the musician and forcing himself to restrain a laugh at the grotesque round face with the eyes screwed-up into narrow slits.

“Oh, no one will come here now,” was the reply. “I get so little practice. I shall blow gently.” Directly afterwards he began to run up and down,

playing through some exercise with which he was familiar extremely softly; and then by way of a change he began what is technically known as “double-tonguing.”

This was too much for Oliver West. He had stood rubbing first one rifle and then the other with a slightly-oiled rag to get rid of specks of rust or dust, every now and then stealing a glance at the absurdly screwed-up face, feeling the while that a good hearty laugh would do him good, but determined to maintain his composure so as not to hurt the performer’s feelings. But the double-tonguing was too much.

Tootle-too, tootle-too, tootle, tootle-too went the performer, running up the gamut till he reached the octave and was about to run down again, but he stopped short, lowered his instrument, and turned from a warm pink to a deep purply crimson, for West suddenly burst out into a half-hysterical roar of laughter, one which he vainly strove to check.

“I—I—I—I beg your pardon,” he cried at last.

“Thank you,” snorted out Anson; “but I don’t see anything to laugh at.”

“I couldn’t help it, Anson. You did look so—so comic. Such a face!”

“Did I?” cried the musician angrily. “Such a face, indeed! You should see your own. Your grin looked idiotic: half-way between a bushman and a baboon.”

“Thank you,” said West, calming down at once, and feeling nettled in turn.

“Oh, you’re quite welcome,” said Anson sarcastically. “I have heard about casting pearls before swine; but I never saw the truth of the saying before.”

“Thank you again,” said West, frowning. “But if I were you I would not waste any more of my pearls in such company.”

“I do not mean to,” said Anson, with his eyes glittering.

He got no farther, though he was prepared to say something crushing, for

the door was flung open and their fellow-clerk came back quickly.

“Hullo!” he cried, “flute and hautboy. I say, Sim, put that thing away and don’t bring it here, or I shall have an accident with it some day. You ought to have stopped him, Noll. But come out, both of you. There’s some fun in the compound. They’re going to thoroughly search half-a-dozen Kaffirs, and I thought you’d like to see.”

“Been stealing diamonds?” cried Anson excitedly.

“Suspected,” replied Ingleborough.

“I’ll come too,” said Anson, and he began to rapidly unscrew his flute, but so hurriedly that in place of separating the top joint from the next he pulled it open at the tuning-slide, changed colour, and swung himself round so as to turn his back to his companions, keeping in that position till his instrument was properly separated and replaced in its case, whose lid he closed, and then turned the key.

“I’m ready,” he cried, facing round and buttoning his jacket over the little mahogany case.

“Do you take that shepherd’s pipe to bed with you?” said Ingleborough scornfully.

“Generally,” replied the fat-looking clerk innocently. “You see, it’s so nice when one wakes early, and I have learned to blow so softly now that I can often get an hour’s practice before I have my morning’s bath.”

“How delightful for the other boarders! You’re at Dick Tomlin’s house, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Anson.

“Have they any room for another boarder, Sim?”

“I—I really don’t know, but I’ll ask, if you like, this evening.”

“No, no; don’t, please,” cried Ingleborough. “Perhaps it might be too strong for me. I ought to go through a course of bagpipes first.”

Anson had fastened two buttons of his jacket so as to hold the flute-case from slipping, and now he fastened another button, smiling pleasantly the while.

“That’s meant for a joke,” he said.

“Quite right,” cried Ingleborough abruptly. “Come along.”

He stepped out, closely followed by West, and Anson called after them: “With you directly,” as the door swung to.

“Don’t do that again,” whispered West.

“What?”

“Say anything to chaff old Anson. Did you see how he behaved?”

“I saw him smile like a Chinese mandarin ornament. That’s all.”

“I saw him smile and look smooth; but he can’t bear a joke. His hands were all of a tremble as he buttoned up his jacket, and there was a peculiar look in his eye. It’s not good policy to make enemies.”

“Nonsense! He’s a poor slack-baked animal. I wonder they ever had him here.”

West glanced back; but Anson had not yet left the office.

“Relative of one of the directors,” said West quickly; “and I’ve noticed several things lately to make me think he does not like us.”

“Oh, if you come to that,” said Ingleborough, “so have I. That’s quite natural, for we don’t like him. One can’t; he’s so smooth and soft. But why doesn’t he come? I’ll just give him a minute after we get up to the compound gate, and if he is not there then he’ll have to stay outside.”

“Here he comes,” cried West, and the next minute their fellow-clerk joined them, just as they got up to a gate in the high fence of the enclosure where the Kaffir workers about the diamond-mines were kept to all intents prisoners till they had served the time for which they had

engaged.

“Haven’t kept you two waiting, have I?” said Anson, with a pleasant smile directed at both.

“No, no, all right,” replied West, and directly after they were admitted to the compound, just in time to find that half-a-dozen of the stalwart Kaffir workers were standing perfectly nude awaiting the examination about to be made by some of the officers—an examination which they seemed to look upon as a joke, for they laughed and chatted together.

“Looking as innocent as old Anson, only not so white,” whispered Ingleborough. “But we shall see.”

Chapter Two.

Black Innocents.

The examination of the men was not a pleasant duty, but it was carried out in the most matter-of-fact way by a couple of experienced white men, who began at once.

“Now, you,” cried the one who seemed to be the head; “this way.”

The big black spoken to stepped forward at once, smiling good-temperedly, and stopped by a heavy wooden stool, upon which he planted a foot, and in obedience to orders separated his toes in turn to show that he had no diamonds hidden between them. Then he was seized by the searchers, the first holding the black’s head on one side while his companion took hold of the lobe of the right ear and twisted it about, ending by thrusting in a small wooden scoop and afterwards turning it to act as a sound.

“Don’t seem to have a diamond in there,” said Anson, smiling and looking very innocent, but deeply interested. “Turn him over.”

But the searchers had not waited for Anson’s words, and were already turning the black’s head over, the man yielding himself to every push and

thrust, smiling good-humouredly the while, though the treatment was decidedly rough.

“Nothing in the other ear,” said Anson, smiling at West. “Shouldn’t wonder if he’s got ever so many tucked in his cheeks, like a monkey pouches nuts.”

This time it seemed as if the same idea had struck the searchers, for the black was ordered to open his mouth, and a big coarse finger was thrust in, and the interior of the mouth was carefully explored, without result.

“Here, I know,” whispered Anson, rubbing his hands together. “Oh, the artfulness of the beggar!”

“Where are they, then, old Double-cunning?” cried Ingleborough contemptuously.

“Stuck with gum in amongst his woolly hair—I say, isn’t it fun?”

“Rather disgusting,” replied West. “I shouldn’t like the job.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Anson; “it sets me thinking, and it’s interesting. Hah! I was right.”

He stood rubbing his hands together in his childish enjoyment, while one of the searchers carefully passed his hands all over the black’s head, but found no small diamonds tangled up amongst the curly little knots of hair.

“Well, I did think he’d got some there,” continued Anson.—“Oh, of course! One might have guessed it before.”

This was upon the black’s head being forced back a trifle, while a pinch of snuff was blown through a pea-shooter right into the prisoner’s nose, making him sneeze violently.

But still no diamonds made their appearance, and after a little further search the man was set at liberty, giving place to another supposed culprit.

This man came up smiling and confident, opening his mouth wide, to

display its state of innocency and a magnificent set of teeth at the same time.

“Take care! he bites,” said Ingleborough banteringly; and Anson, who had pressed to the front, started back in horror, to be greeted with a burst of laughter.

“How fond you are of a joke!” he cried, smoothing his face.

At the same moment one of the searchers sent a puff of snuff in the black’s face, with the result that he was seized with a violent burst of coughing and sneezing.

“Two—three—four!” cried Anson excitedly, and, springing forward, he picked up three of the diamonds ejected by the black, who, after a little further search, yielded up a couple of very small stones from one ear, and was marched off for punishment.

“I do like this!” said Anson, rubbing his hands together. “What brutes of thieves they are!”

“Yes, you ought to take to searching,” said West, smiling. “You’d make a capital detective.”

“Think so?” said the young man, growing serious directly. “You’re not chaffing me, are you?”

“Chaffing? Not at all! I mean it,” replied West.

“Well, do you know,” said Anson, in a confidential way, “I don’t think I should make a bad one. I know I should like it better than the work I do now. But look what a big strong fellow this one is. I wonder whether he has any.”

“Half-a-dozen, I daresay,” said West, looking curiously at another stalwart black, who came forward slowly and unwillingly to take the place of the second man, set aside for punishment.

“N–n–no,” said Anson thoughtfully. “I don’t think this one has any.”

“Why?” asked West.

“I can’t say,” replied Anson dreamily. “I only know that I don’t think he has any.” And, as it happened, the most rigid examination failed to discover any of the gems. But, all the same, the culprit was set aside for punishment, two of the watchers present at the examination declaring that they had seen him put his hand to his mouth and swallow something.

The next man, upon being summoned to the stool, came up boldly and displayed a child-like eagerness to prove his innocence, opening his mouth widely and passing his fore-fingers round between gums and cheeks, thrusting his little fingers into his ears, and then bending down and going through the motion of one washing his head.

But he did not wash any gems out of his shock of little nubbly curls.

“No got no dymons, boss,” he cried. “Me go now, boss?”

“No,” said the chief searcher sharply. “Clap that foot of yours upon the stool.”

The black stared at him hard and shook his head.

“Do you hear?” cried the searcher. “Clap that right foot upon the stool.”

The black stared at him vacantly, shook his head again, and turned to the second searcher, who translated the order into the man’s own tongue.

At this the black smiled and nodded. Then, turning to the chief searcher, he placed his bare left foot upon the stool.

“No, no: the other,” cried the stern official, pointing to the right foot, and the order was emphasised by his assistant.

Once more the black looked intelligent, placed both his feet upon the ground, changed them several times by shuffling them about, and once more placed his left foot upon the stool.

Anson chuckled with delight, and turned to West.

But this act on the part of the black was too much for the chief searcher's composure.

"Up with the black scoundrel's foot!" he roared, and his assistant seized the black's ankle, and gave it such a vigorous hoist that the man's equilibrium was upset, so that, though the foot was planted firmly on the stool, he fell over backwards, leaving his support upon the stool, where it was probed by the searchers, who were not at all surprised to find a large stone hidden between the little and the next toe.

"There's a blackguard!" cried Anson excitedly, turning to his companions. "He ought to be well flogged, and no mistake. Well, I never!"

The last words were uttered in disgust at the man's behaviour, for he burst into a hearty laugh as if thoroughly enjoying the discovery, professing at the same time to be utterly astonished.

"How come there?" he cried. "'Tick 'tween um toe—so."

He illustrated "so" by stamping his foot down over and over again and raising it up, the last time cleverly picking an ordinary pebble from the ground with his toes, and holding it out as easily as if he had used his fingers and thumb.

But his action had no effect upon those around, who were well used to the Kaffirs' tricks, and received everything with the grimmest of looks as they passed their prisoner along for punishment, and finally ordered forward the last man. This prisoner took West's attention from the first, for he was a well-built, keenly intelligent-looking fellow, who seemed quite awake to his position and behaved throughout with a calm air of conscious innocence.

It struck West, too, that the Kaffir kept on gazing very hard at Anson, as if attracted by his gently-smiling, innocent-looking face, and as if he were silently pleading to the most amiable-looking personage of the party to intercede for him and save him from punishment.

Anson, however, did not appear to notice the man's eager looks, being too much interested in the search for illicitly-acquired stones, and eagerly watching every phase of the proceedings, his eyes sparkling and cheeks

flushed with pink at every fresh discovery, while he rubbed his hands and looked from one to the other with all the pleasure of some big, fat, stupid child.

“Now then,” cried the chief searcher roughly; “come along.”

The Kaffir quietly submitted to the rough handling he experienced in being forced up to the stool, and, anticipating the order, he opened his mouth; but the under-searcher roughly told him to “shut up,” and he closed his fine white teeth with an audible snap, while the search was commenced at his feet, the toes being carefully examined without result.

Then his closely-knotted hair, which looked as if it would have made, if he were scalped, good trimmings of astrachan wool for the collar and cuffs of an English gentleman’s overcoat, was carefully searched by well-trained fingers; the ears were probed and inspected; nostrils searched and given a final wring between thumb and finger as if he were being insulted in old-fashioned style by pulling his nose; and lastly, his cheeks were felt outside and in, and the searchers, who looked puzzled, made the black kneel down and remain for some time in that position, with his mouth wide open and head thrown back so that the sun shone right into his great mouth.

“He’s all right!” said Anson enthusiastically. “You’ve got the wrong pig by the ear this time. I thought this fellow looked honest.”

The Kaffir darted a grateful look at the speaker, which told plainly enough that he comprehended the words, and Anson replied with a smile.

“Ah, you ought to be on this job, Mr Anson,” said the chief searcher sarcastically. “You’d be invaluable here.”

Anson laughed good-humouredly.

“You’re bantering,” he said; “I know. But I should like it, and I fancy I could find the diamonds quickly enough if a man had hidden any.”

“Find them then now,” said the man who had spoken. “Come on.”

There was a general laugh here, in which Anson joined.

“Nay,” he said good-humouredly; “get another subject who has some hidden. That chap has none, unless he has swallowed some.”

“What would you do then, squire?” said the man. “Shoot him, and make a *post-mortem* exam?”

“Ugh! horrid!” cried Anson, with a look of the most intense disgust. “But I say, I mean it. Fetch another chap, and let me examine him. I should like to, really.”

“Why don’t you search this one?” said Ingleborough contemptuously, and West laughed.

Anson winced and turned upon them half-angrily. But he changed his manner before he had finished speaking, and his face broke up into a broad smile.

“Because I don’t want to be laughed at by you chaps and called a fool,” he said. “I’m not stupid enough as it is to believe he has any diamonds hidden.”

“Well, I am,” said Ingleborough coolly.

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Anson mockingly. “You go on with the search then, and find them.”

“There is no need,” said Ingleborough coldly; “those two know what they’re about.”

He was wrong in saying “two,” for the under-searcher now continued the examination, and Anson’s eyes were screwed-up and twinkled again upon seeing the man give up at the end of another two minutes and shrug his shoulders.

“No go,” he said, turning to his companion. “Someone has been too clever here.”

“Look again,” said his chief.

“No: I shan’t look any more. I’ve done.”

West's eyes were resting upon the Kaffir, and he saw the man draw in a deep slow breath which made his broad chest expand, retaining the air for a minute and then slowly ejecting it.

"Ah! you'll never make a first-class searcher, Jem," said the head man.

"I never did profess to be so smart as you are," retorted the other sharply.

"No, Jemmy, you never did," said his chief; "but you ought to have found something here."

"Why, you don't think he has any about him, do you?" cried the man, who was staggered by his chief's cool, confident way of speaking.

"Yes, I do," said the chief, "and so does Mr Ingleborough there. Don't you, sir?"

Ingleborough nodded shortly, and West saw the Kaffir's eyes flash, while when he turned to Anson he saw that his fellow-clerk's face looked cold and hard.

But Anson's aspect changed the next moment, as soon as he saw he was observed, and he said, with a broad grin: "Wish I was a betting man: I could easily win half-a-crown or two over this."

But it struck West that there was a ring of insincerity in the tone of his voice, and the hard look began to come like a grey shadow over his fat pink cheeks as he saw the chief searcher go closer up to the Kaffir, bring his hands down heavily upon the man's shoulders, and stand facing him and looking him full in the eyes.

There was utter silence now. The Kaffir stood for a moment firmly gazing back into his white holder's eyes; but it manifestly required a strong effort, and West felt sure that he saw a quiver like a shadow of dread run down the black, making his knees slightly shake.

The whole thing was momentary, and the looker-on could not feel sure. Then the searcher spoke.

"You're a clever one," he said, with a harsh laugh, "and you don't mind

hurting yourself to do a bit of the illicit. Turn round."

He gave the Kaffir a sharp thrust with one hand, a pull with the other, and the man stood with his back to the lookers-on.

Chapter Three.

Rather Suspicious.

What followed was performed with the quick dexterity of a clever surgeon, the searcher bending down, grasping the great firm muscles of the Kaffir's right leg about mid-way between hip and knee, and pressing hard with his two thumbs, when to the surprise of West a small perpendicular slit opened and a good-sized diamond was forced out, to fall upon the ground and be received by the under-searcher, while the wound closed up again with all the elasticity of a cut made in a piece of indiarubber.

"Bravo!" cried West, and then he held his breath as he saw the clever manipulation performed upon the Kaffir's other leg, a second diamond being forced out of the man's elastic muscle, to be secured in turn.

"That will do," said the chief searcher, after a quick glance down the Kaffir's arms, the man scowling and looking depressed as he was marched away.

"Almost a pity you didn't back your opinion heavily, Mr Anson, eh?" added the official.

"Well, I am deceived," said Anson, wrinkling up his forehead. "Who'd ever have thought of that?"

"The Kaffirs, seemingly," said Ingleborough coolly? and he smiled in Anson's disconsolate face.

"But it's wicked," cried Anson, "downright wicked for a man to cut himself like that for the sake of a bit of glittering glass. I say, mustn't it hurt very much?"

“Can’t say,” said West merrily. “Try!”

“What, me?” cried Anson, looking startled and involuntarily thrusting his hands down to touch the parts in question. “Oh no! It’s horrible what people will do for the sake of gain.”

“Quite sure you wouldn’t like to try, Mr Anson?” said the searcher. “I’ll do it for you if you like. Only wants a very sharp knife and a good hard pinch to numb the muscle; then it’s done in a few minutes—one good cut, the stone pressed in, and the cold surface makes the skin contract.”

Anson’s face seemed to curdle up, and two creases formed, one round each corner of his mouth, as if putting it between parentheses, as he shook his head.

“Look here,” he said, “what’s the good of bantering so? Are you going to search any more men?”

“No,” said the official; “that’s the lot.”

“But are you going to punish them?”

“Oh yes! They’ll have to take their dose for it, sir; you may be sure of that. We’re going to be more and more severe over this illicit-diamond-dealing.”

“Are you?” said Anson innocently.

“We just are. It’ll be a shooting matter soon if it can’t be stopped otherwise.”

“How horrid!” said Anson. “But I say, these men don’t deal illicitly, do they?”

“They wouldn’t if a set of scoundrels did not set them on to steal, so that they could buy of the poor ignorant savages, giving them shillings for what they sell for pounds.”

“How sad it seems!” said Anson thoughtfully.

“And how innocent you seem!” said West, laughing.

“Yes, it’s charming,” cried Ingleborough. “Why, you know all about it.”

“I?” cried Anson. “Oh, of course I know something about it. I’ve heard of the illicit-diamond-dealing, and read about it; but it has all gone in at one ear and out at the other. You see, I devote so much time to music. That and my work at the office keep me from taking much notice of other things. Politics, for instance, and the rumours of war. Do you think it at all likely that there will be any fighting, West?”

“I can’t say,” was the reply; “but we’re going to be perfectly ready for the Boers in case there is, and it’s quite time we were off, Ingleborough, if we intend to answer at the roll-call.”

“Hah! Yes,” cried the young man addressed. “Better come with us, Anson.”

The latter shook his head, and his companions separated from him at the gate.

“Better come,” said Ingleborough again. “Join, and then you’ll be on the spot if we do form a band.”

“Oh no!” said Anson, smiling. “You make up your minds at headquarters to form a band, and then, if you like, I’ll come and train it.”

“He’s a rum fellow,” said West, as the two young men fell into step.

“Ah,” said Ingleborough roughly, “I am afraid Master Anson’s more R. than F.”

“More R. than F?” said West questioningly.

“If you must have it in plain English, more rogue than fool.”

“Well, I fancy he isn’t quite so simple as he pretends to be.”

“Bah! I’m not a quarrelsome fellow, but I always feel as if I must kick him. He aggravates me.”

“Nice soft sort of a fellow to kick,” said West, laughing.

“Ugh!” ejaculated Ingleborough, and his foot flew out suddenly as if aimed at the person of whom they spoke. “Don’t know anything about diamonds! What things people will do for the sake of a bit of glittering glass! Look here, West, for all his talk I wouldn’t trust him with a consignment of stones any farther than I could see him.”

“Don’t be prejudiced!” said West. “You don’t like him, and so you can only see his bad side.”

“And that’s all round,” replied Ingleborough laughing. “No; I don’t like him. I never do like a fellow who is an unnatural sort of a prig. He can’t help being fat and pink and smooth, but he can help his smiling, sneaky manner. I do like a fellow to be manly. Hang him! Put him in petticoats, with long hair and a bonnet, he’d look like somebody’s cook. But if I had an establishment and he was mine, I should be afraid he’d put something unpleasant into my soup.”

“Never mind about old Anson,” said West merrily, “but look here. What about that illicit-diamond-buying? Do you think that there’s much of it taking place?”

“Much?” cried his companion. “It is tremendous. The company’s losing hundreds of thousands of pounds yearly.”

“Nonsense!”

“It’s a fact,” said Ingleborough earnestly; “and no end of people are hard at work buying stolen diamonds, in spite of the constant sharp look-out kept by the police.”

“But I should have thought that the licences and the strict supervision would have checked the greater part of it.”

“Then you’d have thought wrong, my boy. I wish it did, for as we are going on now it makes everyone suspicious and on the look-out. I declare that for months past I never meet any of our people without fancying they suspect me of buying and selling diamonds on the sly.”

“And that makes you suspicious too,” said West quietly.

Ingleborough turned upon him sharply, and looked him through and through.

“What made you say that?” he said at last.

“Previous conversation,” replied West.

“Humph! Well, perhaps so.”

Chapter Four.

Rumours of War.

The Diamond-Fields Horse had drilled one evening till they were tired, and after it was all over, including a fair amount of firing, the smell of blank cartridges began to give way to the more pleasant odour of tobacco smoke, the officers lighting their cigars, and the privates filling up their pipes to incense the crisp evening air.

“I’m about tired of this game,” said one of a group who were chatting together; “there’s too much hard work about it.”

“Yes,” said another. “Someone told me it was playing at soldiers. I don’t see where the play comes.”

“Look at the honour of it,” said another. “We shall be defending the town directly from an attack by the Boers.”

There was a burst of laughter at this, and when it ended the first speaker broke out contemptuously with: “The Boers! We shall have to wait a longtime before they attack us.”

“I don’t know so much about that,” said the man who had spoken of the attack. “I believe they mean mischief.”

“Bosh!” came in chorus.

“Ah, you may laugh, but they’ve got Majuba Hill on the brain. The idiots think they fought and thrashed the whole British Army instead of a few hundred men. Here, Ingleborough, you heard what was said?”

The young man addressed left off chatting with West and nodded.

“You went to Pretoria with the superintendent of police about that diamond case, and you were there a couple of months.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough. “What of that?”

“Why, you must have seen a good deal of the Boers then!”

“Of course I did.”

“Well, what do you say? Will they fight if it comes to a row?”

“Certainly they will!” replied Ingleborough.

There was a derisive laugh at his words, and West flushed a little on hearing it, as the volunteers gathered round.

“Bah! It’s all bluff!” cried a voice. “They know that by holding out they can get what they want. They’d cave in directly if we showed a bold front.”

“Moral,” said West; “show a bold front.”

“That’s what we’re doing,” said one of the men; “but there’s too much of it. Some of the officers have war on the brain, and want to force the soldiering element to the very front. We’ve done enough to show the Doppers that we should fight if there was any occasion. There was no drilling going on when you were at Pretoria, eh, Ingleborough?”

“Yes, there was, a good deal,” said the young man slowly. “They did not make any fuss, but in a quiet way they were hard at work, especially with their gun drill.”

“Gun drill!” cried one of the group contemptuously. “What, with a few rusty old cannon and some wooden quakers?”

There was a roar of laughter at this, and West coloured a little more deeply with annoyance, but Ingleborough shrugged his shoulders, turned his little finger into a tobacco-stopper, and went on smoking.

“The Boers are puffed-up with conceit,” he said gravely, “and they believe that their victory at Majuba Hill has made them invincible; but all the same they’ve got some level-headed men amongst them, and I believe before long that it will come to a fight and that they will fight desperately.”

His hearers laughed.

“What for?” shouted one.

“To drive the British out of South Africa, seize Cape Colony and Natal, and make the country a Dutch republic.”

There was a momentary silence before someone cried: “I say, Ingleborough, are you going mad?”

“I hope not,” said the young man quietly. “Why?”

“Because you are talking the greatest bosh I’ve heard for months!”

“I don’t think I am,” said Ingleborough gravely. “I know that the Boers are terribly inflated with vanity and belief in themselves, but they have wisdom in their heads as well.”

“I’ve never seen any of it!” said the previous speaker. “Bah! Rubbish! They drive us out of South Africa! Why, that would mean taking Rhodesia too.”

“Of course,” replied Ingleborough, “and that’s what they believe they are going to do.”

“With popguns?”

“No,” said Ingleborough gravely; “but with their rifles. Do you know that they can at any time arm a hundred thousand men with the best magazine-rifles in the world?”

“No!” came in chorus. “We don’t.”

“And that they have a magnificent force of artillery, which includes such guns as would dwarf any that we could bring against them, thoroughly outrange ours, and that in addition they have a great number of repeating-cannon—Maxims and Nordenfelts? Above all, they have a vast supply of ammunition.”

“Where did they get it from?” cried one.

“The moon,” shouted another, and there was a roar.

“The fellow’s a regular Boer himself,” shouted a man behind; and there was a hiss raised, followed by a menacing groan, which made West’s blood tingle as he closed up to his friend’s side.

“The old story,” said Ingleborough contemptuously, “You can’t bear the honest truth.”

“Yes, we can,” cried one of the men; “but we can’t bear lies. Do you think we are fools to believe your cock-and-bull stories about magazine-rifles and guns that would dwarf all that the British Army could bring up against the Boers?”

“You can do as you like about believing,” said Ingleborough coldly. “I have only told you what I learned for myself when I was staying in Pretoria.”

“And do you mean to tell us that the Boers have guns like that?”

“I do,” said Ingleborough.

“Then where did they get them?”

“From the great French and German makers, From Creusot and Krupp.”

“And how did they get them up to Pretoria?”

“From the Cape and Delagoa Bay.”

“What nonsense!” cried another voice. “Their arms and ammunition

would have been stopped at once. What do you say to that?”

“The Boers are slim,” said Ingleborough. “Hundreds of tons of war material have been going up-country for years as ironmongery goods and machinery. They have a tremendous arsenal there, and they mean to fight, as you’ll see before long.”

The hissing and threatening sounds ceased, for there was so much conviction in the tone adopted by the speaker that his hearers began to feel uneasy and as if there might be something in the declarations, while, upon Ingleborough turning to West with: “Come Oliver, let’s get home!” the little crowd of volunteers hedged the pair in, and the man who had been the most ready to laugh laid a hand upon his arm.

“Hold hard a minute,” he cried frankly. “I felt ready to laugh at you and chaff all your words; but I’m not going to be a dunder-headed fool and shut my eyes to danger if there really is any. Look here, Ingleborough: are you an alarmist, or is there really any truth in what you have said?”

“It is all true,” replied the young man calmly.

“Well, then, I for one will believe you, my lad; for, now you have spoken out as you have, I begin to put that and that together and I feel that the Boers have been playing dark.”

“They have been playing dark,” said Ingleborough warmly, “and I should not be surprised to hear any day that they had declared war and found us anything but prepared.”

“They only want to be free,” said a voice.

“Free?” cried Ingleborough. “Yes, free to do exactly what they please: to tax every stranger, or outlander, as they call us, for their own benefit: to rob and enslave the unfortunate natives, and even murder them if it suits their hand. Free? Yes, look at their history from the first. Why, their whole history has been a course of taking land from the original owners by force.”

That very night rumours reached Kimberley which sent a tingle into the cheeks of every man who had joined in the demonstration against

Ingleborough: though the greatest news of all had not yet arrived, that the Transvaal Government had thrown down the glove and made the advance.

Chapter Five.

An Ugly Charge.

As everyone knows, the declaration of war was not long in coming, and the news came like a thunderclap to all in Kimberley, where those who had been in doubt as to the wisdom of the preparations previously made were the loudest in finding fault because more had not been done.

“But do you think it’s true, Ingle?” said West.

“Think what is true?”

“That the Boers have invaded Natal.”

“I’m sure it is,” was the reply; “and before very long we shall have them here.”

“Why should they come here?” said West.

“Because they have plenty of gold at Johannesburg, and they want to utilise it for settings to our diamonds, my lad. They’re a nice, modest, amiable people, these Boers, with very shrewd eyes for the main chance. They’ll soon be down here to take possession, so if you feel at all uncomfortable you had better be off south.”

“Is that what you are going to do?” asked West quietly.

“I? Of course not! I shall keep with the volunteers.”

“Of course,” said West; “and I shall too.”

Ingleborough smiled grimly and went on with his work, West following suit, and they were busy enough till “tiffin-time” that morning.

Their “tiffin” went on as usual; but out in the town there was a buzz of excitement which resembled that heard in a beehive when some mischievous boy has thrust in a switch and given it a good twist round before running for his life.

So eager and excited did everyone seem that West could hardly tear himself away from the main street, which was full of talking groups, everyone seeming to be asking the same question—“What is to be done first?”—but getting no reply.

“We ought to fortify the place,” said West to himself, and full of this idea, which he intended to propound to Ingleborough and Anson as soon as he reached the office, he hurried in that direction, all the faster from the fact that he had been so interested in the busy state of the streets that he had overstayed his time.

On approaching the office door the conscious blood rose to his cheeks, for he could hear an angry voice speaking, upon which he could only place one interpretation—namely, that one of the principals was finding fault severely because he, the guilty one, was not back to his time.

“What a fool I am!” muttered West. Then, pulling himself together, he stepped forward, muttering again: “Must take my dose like a man.”

The next moment he had opened the door quickly, entered and closed it, and then stood staring in wonder at the scene before him.

For there was no angry principal present—only his two fellow-clerks: Ingleborough stern and frowning, and Anson with his ordinarily pink face turned to a sallow white, and, instead of being plump and rounded, looking sunken and strange.

“What’s the matter?” said West, for Anson, who had the moment before been talking rapidly, suddenly ceased. “You’re not quarrelling, are you?” he continued, for no one replied. “Oh well, I’ll be off till you’ve done.”

“No, don’t go,” cried Anson, springing forward and grasping his arm.

“Let go!” cried West. “I don’t want to be mixed up with any quarrels; but you might have got them over outside. There, I’m off.”

“Stop where you are!” cried Ingleborough. “You have a perfect right to hear what I have said, and you’re welcome.”

“Yes, stop where you are, West,” cried Anson, clinging to the young fellow’s arm. “I believe that the war scare has sent Ingle off his head. You never heard such a bit of scandal as he is trying to hatch up. I believe it’s all out of jealousy.”

“No, you do not,” said Ingleborough coldly.

“But I do,” cried Anson. “It’s scandalous. He’s trying to ruin me.”

“How?”

“By hatching up a story which, if it got to the principals’ ears, would mean me being turned off neck and crop, no matter how innocent I am.”

“How what?” replied Ingleborough ironically. “Innocent? Why, I’ve suspected you for some months past.”

“Oh, my gracious!” cried Anson. “Hark at him! He does mean it—he must mean it, unless we can bring him to his senses, West. You will help me, won’t you?”

“How can I tell till I know what it’s all about? What’s the quarrel, Ingle?”

“Ask him,” answered the young man addressed, frowning.

“Very well, then; I’ll ask him. What’s the row, Anson?”

“I have hardly patience to tell you, West,” was the reply. “But I suppose I must, though it makes my face burn with shame.”

“Humph!” grunted Ingleborough.

“Then it is something you are ashamed of?” said West quickly.

“Me? Oh no, West; I’m not ashamed. I’ve nothing to be ashamed of: only being accused by a fellow-clerk, a brother-clerk, I might say, of doing a terrible thing.”

“And did you?” said West sharply.

“I? Good gracious, no! I was out in the main street about half-an-hour ago, being of course interested in the news, when I saw a couple of Kaffirs talking, and it made me wonder what would become of them if it came to fighting, and I naturally enough asked the poor fellows whether they’d stay in Kimberley or go back to their own country.”

“Well?” said West, for the speaker stopped.

“Well, that’s all as far as I’m concerned,” said Anson; “only just then Ingleborough, who is never happy without he’s mixing himself up somehow with the police folk, and who must have been watching me in a miserable underhanded way, suddenly pounced upon me; and you’ll never believe it, my dear West, he actually accused me of illicit-diamond-buying from the Kaffirs.”

“And that means very severe punishment,” said West. “Well, were you doing it?”

“Was I? Oh, for shame, West! How could you think such a thing possible? My dear fellow, I couldn’t do such a thing? Is it likely?”

“Ingleborough says it is,” replied the young man addressed, shortly.

“Yes, but only because he is absurdly jealous of me, and dislikes to see me in the office. It would ruin me for ever if it were reported, and he says he is going to, although I have been begging and praying him not to do such a thing. What do you say?”

“If it’s true, and Ingleborough says it is, I don’t see how he could help, reporting your conduct to the directors.”

“But it isn’t true!” cried Anson, almost in a whine. “Oh, West, how can you? You know I couldn’t do such a thing!”

“Do you mean to say that you are quite innocent?”

“Oh, quite!” cried Anson. “It was as I told you. I only asked the two poor hard-working fellows what they meant to do, and then to my utter

astonishment Ingleborough pounced upon me with that terrible charge. Help me, my dear friend, to make him see that he has deceived himself!”

“Do you hear, Ingle?” cried West sympathetically. “It is a terrible charge to bring against a fellow.”

“Terrible!” said Ingleborough sternly.

“And you have thought what it means?”

“Of course.”

“His dismissal and imprisonment?”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“There is no room for buts, my lad,” said Ingleborough harshly. “Diamond-buying from the natives is, as we all well know, penal; and we know, too, that it is our duty to help to protect the property of our employers, and to see that the laws are obeyed.”

“Of course, my dear Ingleborough,” said Anson; “and that’s what I have always tried to do, as you know.”

“I know that you have been playing a false game for months—that is, I feel perfectly sure you have, though I cannot prove it. But this I can prove: that you were buying stolen diamonds from two natives this afternoon, all parties choosing the time because you believed the excitement would secure you from notice.”

“Oh, West, hark at him!” cried Anson, in a piteous tone. “Ingleborough, you don’t know how wrong you are!”

“That’s true!” said their fellow-clerk.

“Look here, Anson,” cried West angrily; “what’s the good of going on like a great girl—oh-ing, and making weak appeals? Why don’t you speak out like a man? Is it true, or is it not, that you bought these diamonds?”

“It’s all a mistake of Ingleborough’s and as false as false can be! I couldn’t do such a thing!”

“Nor yet throw them away as soon as you found that you were seen?”

“Of course not!” cried Anson excitedly.

“What are these, then?” cried Ingleborough sternly, as he took a couple of rough crystals from his trousers pocket and held them out in his hand to the astonished gaze of his comrades.

“Those?” said Anson, whose face began to turn of a sickly green; “they look like diamonds.”

“Yes: they are the two that you threw away, and which I went and picked up.”

“Oh!” cried Anson, with a piteous groan; “hark at him, West! I wouldn’t have believed that a man could have been so base as to hatch up such a plot as this to ruin his brother-employé. West, I assure you that I never set eyes upon those diamonds before in my life. It’s all a cruel, dastardly plot, and I— Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear! Is it possible that a man can be so base?”

He took out his handkerchief and applied it to his eyes, uttering a low piteous groan the while.

“You hear this, Ingleborough?” said West.

“Yes, I hear,” said Ingleborough sourly, as he thrust the gems back in his pocket. “So do you, and you know now what it is my duty to do.”

West was silent.

“Oh, do speak and help me!” cried Anson. “Don’t stand by and see me ruined, West! You know how he has taken up lately with the new superintendent of police, and been always with him, and watching the poor natives till he is half a detective himself, and goes about suspecting innocent people. I am innocent, West, and it’s all a horrible mistake of his, or a cruel trick to ruin me; and I’m afraid I’ve been mistaken in him

altogether, and that it is a wicked conspiracy."

"Ingleborough wouldn't do a mean thing!" said West warmly.

"That's what I want to believe," whined Anson; "but he's got hold of two diamonds, and he's going to charge me with buying them, and he'll get me sent to Cape Town breakwater."

"Not if you are innocent!" said West.

"Well, that's what I am, and he can't prove that I've any of the precious stones about me. Come and search me if you like!"

"You will be searched by the police authorities," said Ingleborough sternly.

"What!—Oh, it's abominable!" cried Anson. "Here, West, aren't you going to do anything to help an innocent man?"

"What can I do," said West, "but look on? I'll tell you this, though: I don't believe it possible of you! There must be some mistake!"

"Thank you for nothing," cried Anson bitterly. "It's the old story—and you call yourself a friend! Well, I'm not going to be bullied. I've given you both a chance to own that you are all wrong; but you always were both of you dead against me. I'll do now what I ought to have done at once—go to the principals. I shall get justice there."

Saying this, he clapped on his hat, giving it a fierce cock on one side, passed out, and banged the door after him.

Ingleborough paid no heed to his companion's enquiring look, but crossed quickly to the window and looked out.

"Anson thinks he is going to make a bolt," said Ingleborough, half to himself; "but he'll soon find out his mistake."

"How?" said West eagerly.

"Norton is outside with a couple of the police," Ingleborough replied.

“But this is very horrible!” cried West. “Once more, are you quite sure that you have not made a mistake?”

“Quite! I am certain!”

“But is it wise to be so certain?”

“Yes,” replied Ingleborough quietly. “Surely I can believe my own eyes!”

“But might he not have been questioning the Kaffirs, as he said?”

“Certainly,” replied Ingleborough, with a grim smile; “but I do not see why he should receive two diamonds from them and give them money in exchange, and lastly why he should flick the two diamonds away into the dust as soon as he caught sight of me. Do you?”

“No,” said West thoughtfully. “Well, I am very sorry. What will be the next proceeding?”

“The next thing in an ordinary way would be that the scoundrel would bolt; but, as he must have found out by this time that he is carefully watched, he will no doubt go straight to the principals and brave it out by telling them his own tale and trying to persuade them that I have hatched up a conspiracy against him.”

“And of course he will not be believed,” replied West thoughtfully; “for it is next door to high treason for anyone to be found buying diamonds illicitly from the natives.”

“High treason?” cried Ingleborough, laughing. “Why, my dear boy, it’s much worse than regicide. The authorities in Kimberley look upon diamond-smuggling or stealing as the blackest crime in the calendar.”

“Hallo!” cried West just then. “So soon?”

For there was a sharp rap at the door, and a man entered to announce that the principals of the great company desired the presence of Ingleborough and West directly.

“I don’t see why they want me!” said West. “I know nothing about the

matter.”

“You’ll have to go all the same,” said Ingleborough. “He has dragged your name into the case, and he trusts to you to speak in his behalf.”

“And of course I shall,” said West; “for I’m horribly sorry for the poor fellow. He couldn’t withstand the temptation to buy the diamonds for a mere nothing and sell them at a heavy price.”

“I don’t want to be malicious, Noll,” said Ingleborough; “but I’ve for some time been under the impression that Master Anson was a humbug. There, come along! Of course I don’t like a piece of business like this; but we must make rogues go to the wall. You’re too soft-hearted, Noll, my boy.”

“Perhaps so,” replied the lad; “but I’d rather be so than too hard-hearted.”

Chapter Six.

A Vain Search.

West saw at once upon entering the presence of the principals that things appeared bad for Anson, who stood facing a table at which three of the directors of the great company were seated, all looking very stern. They signed to Ingleborough and West to stand upon their right—Anson was facing them to the left.

Then there was a brief colloquy in a low tone between the three directors, ending in one of them saying aloud: “You speak.”

The gentleman thus addressed turned to Ingleborough.

“Mr Anson has sought this interview with the directors, Mr Ingleborough, to inform us that you have made up a malicious tale about his having been engaged in illicit-diamond-buying. Of course, if you could prove such a charge, it was your duty to inform us.”

“Of course, sir,” replied Ingleborough; “but, though I have for some time suspected him, this affair only occurred during our tiffin-time this morning, and as soon as we returned to the office I felt bound to accuse him as my fellow-clerk, and tell him what I intended to do.”

“So as to give him, if guilty, a good chance to conceal the diamonds or escape?”

“Oh no, sir,” said Ingleborough quietly. “I took proper precautions against that.”

“Indeed?” said the director. “What did you do?”

“Mr Superintendent Norton is a friend of mine, sir, and I went to him at once. He and two of his keenest men have been carefully watching Anson ever since.”

“Humph! Quite right,” said the director, and he glanced at Anson, who

was smiling contemptuously then; but West had seen him wince sharply when Ingleborough mentioned the superintendent's name. "Well," continued the director, "let us hear your version of this business."

"Really, gentlemen," cried Anson, "I ought to have the assistance of a law officer and—"

"Stop, Mr Anson," said the director sharply; "we have heard you all through. Have the goodness to be silent now while Mr Ingleborough gives us his statement."

"But legal assistance, sir."

"You can have as much as you like, sir, as soon as the matter is brought before the magistrates. We must first of all hear what Mr Ingleborough has to say. Now, sir, have the goodness to tell us everything you know about this business."

Ingleborough made his statement perfectly clearly, and it was listened to in silence, and the diamonds were produced.

Afterwards the three directors spoke together in a low tone of voice for a few minutes, ending by turning to Anson to tell him that he must consider himself for the present as suspended from all further duty in connection with the company's business.

"We have no desire to proceed to extremities, Mr Anson," he said in conclusion, "and every opportunity will be given you to clear yourself; but in the meantime you must consider yourself under supervision, and your lodgings will be searched."

"I protest, sir," cried the young man warmly. "You have no right to order such a thing to be done without magisterial authority."

"Then we will assume the right, Mr Anson, as it is a question of our property being stolen by our black employés and finding a purchaser in one of our clerks. Mr West, as the superintendent is keeping an eye upon Anson, I presume he is here?"

"I passed him at the door as I came in, sir," answered West.

“Have the goodness to call him in.”

Anson winced; but he faced the tall stern-looking officer of police as he entered and heard the reason for his being called in.

“Then you wish a search to be made, gentlemen?” said the superintendent.

“Certainly.”

“Look here,” cried Anson fiercely; “there’s law for everybody. I’m not your servant any longer, for I refuse to stay with such a pack of tyrannical dividend-making scoundrels.”

“That will do,” growled the superintendent, in a low, deep voice. “Keep a civil tongue in your head. You’ll do no good for yourself by this.”

“You mind your own business,” cried Anson, turning upon the officer so fiercely that West wondered at the change in his fellow-clerk’s manner.

“All right: I will,” said the officer, seizing him sharply.

“Here, what are you going to do?” cried Anson, in alarm.

“Search you, my lad,” was the reply.

“Then I call everyone present to witness that this is illegal. I’m not going to stand quietly by and be treated like a worm.”

“Leave off wriggling, then,” said the officer.

“I won’t. I refuse to be treated like one of the black labourers.”

“Look here, sir,” said the officer sternly; “I don’t want to treat you like a Kaffir unless you behave like one. You are charged with illicit buying, and your game’s up; so the best thing you can do is to produce everything you have on you and have done with the matter.”

“Search me if you dare,” cried Anson, still keeping up his defiant manner.

“Right: I dare,” said the officer. “Mr Ingleborough, be ready to lend a hand

if I want it."

"If John Ingleborough dares to lay a hand on me I'll send a bullet through him."

In an instant Ingleborough's hand came down heavily upon Anson's shoulder and gripped him fast.

"Never mind him, Norton. It's all bluff. He is unarmed."

"Armed or unarmed," said the superintendent, "I'm going to search him," and directly after a quick pair of hands were busy going through the suspect's pockets.

"Urrr!" he growled, showing his white teeth between his thick red lips, as he cast off thoroughly the mask of servile humility he had previously worn; "it's lucky for you that I am unarmed. But search away. Go on. I'll have heavy damages for this dastardly assault and defamation of character, and the public shall know all about the games carried on by this beautiful diamond syndicate. Curse you all—masters and men! You shall pay for it, and, as for you, John Ingleborough, look out for yourself. Yes, and you too, Oliver West, you miserable sneak. I always hated you."

"Hadn't you better save your breath, Anson?" said West quietly. "You're only making everybody believe you guilty."

"Let 'em," cried the suspect, whose plump round face was now distorted with impotent rage. "I'll be even with all of you for this."

"Humph! Nothing in his pockets; nothing sewn in the seams of his clothes, nor in the band of his trousers," muttered the searcher. Then aloud: "Now then, hold up!"

Anson behaved like a horse, or, as West and Ingleborough afterwards laughingly said, like an ass, lifting to order each foot in turn for the bottoms of his trousers to be examined and the heels of his boots, which had not been bored nor plugged.

"He has nothing upon him, gentlemen," said the officer, at last.

“But you have not thoroughly searched him,” said one of the directors, frowning.

“Oh yes, sir,” replied the officer; “a party like this wouldn’t carry diamonds about him same as a Kaffir would. He wouldn’t play any tricks with his person by slitting or swallowing: he knows too much about the risks. You can be perfectly satisfied that he has nothing about him. I was, as soon as I had turned out his pockets.”

“They’ll be satisfied before they’ve done,” sneered Anson.

“I should like to see his desk and stool in the office where he has worked, gentlemen,” continued the officer.

“Yah!” snarled Anson. “Yes: go on; search everywhere. Perhaps you’d like to search the place where I lodge?”

“Afterwards,” said the officer quietly.

Chapter Seven.

Anson Rebounds.

West saw his fellow-clerk wince slightly again, though it passed unnoticed by the others, and directly after the whole party adjourned to the office, the superintendent’s men following them, and, without doing anything to excite attention, forming a guard at the door.

“There’s nothing here,” said the superintendent in a low tone to Ingleborough and West.

“How do you know?” said the former.

“By his manner. He’s all brag and bounce!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough; “but you don’t know your man.”

“Look here!” cried Anson; “none of that! Search if you like, but no plotting

and planning there! I don't see why they shouldn't be charged too. Search their desks as well as mine. Perhaps you'll find some illicit-diamonds there."

West started, for a strange suspicion shot through his breast.

"If you do they'll swear I put 'em there, and the superintendent will believe them."

"You scoundrel!" cried West passionately, and Anson uttered a low sneering laugh; but his face grew set directly, as the officer turned upon him.

"Which is your desk, sir?" he said sharply.

"Search them all!" was the reply.

"Which is his desk?" said the superintendent to West now.

The young man made no reply, and Ingleborough pointed it out.

"Friends and brother-workers!" said Anson, in a sneering manner. "Look here, noble employers, play fair! Let's have all the desks and the whole place searched."

No one spoke, and after a cursory examination of the tall stool in front of the desk the officer picked up a thick silver-mounted rattan cane thrust in a stand by the side of the desk in company with three umbrellas.

"Yours?" he said, turning to the suspect.

"Yes, and one of the umbrellas too. The worst one's mine. That dandy silk one is West's. The handles of all three are sure to unscrew and are hollowed out to hold diamonds, no doubt."

"Of course," said the officer, and after a glance at the umbrellas he turned the thick heavy cane over in his hands, noticing that in addition to a silver cap there was a thick silver ring about six inches from the top.

"Oh yes, that's hollow too," cried Anson mockingly, "and stuffed full of

diamonds, I daresay.—Ah! mind you don’t cut your fingers!”

For the officer, as he held the thick cane in both hands, tried to unscrew the top part, thickest by the ring, and, after yielding a little, he gave it a sharp tug, drawing out about a foot of a bright blue damascened sword, and then thrusting it back with an impatient “Pish!”

“A sword-stick,” said the officer.

“Well, why not?” cried Anson. “I don’t carry a revolver.”

The officer thrust the cane into the stand, and then, with Anson watching him keenly, raised the lid of the broad flat desk, turned over some books and papers, measured its depth outside and in to make sure that there was no false bottom, and then brought out the clerk’s little flat mahogany box, Anson grinning sneeringly as the lid was opened and the joints of the flute lay exposed to view.

“Now you’ve got ’em, sir!” cried Anson, with a mocking laugh. “Blow through them, and you’ll find it’s all wind.”

The superintendent turned the box upside down, and the joints were left upon the top of the desk, except that the top joint with its gaping mouth-hole stuck in the velvet fitting, but looked the most hollow of the set.

“There’s nothing here, gentlemen,” said the officer, replacing the other joints and gravely closing the desk.

“Oh, nonsense!” cried Anson, jeering. “You haven’t half looked. Perhaps, though, young West has the whole swag in his desk.”

“Would you like to examine the other desks, gentlemen?” said the officer.

“No, certainly not,” said the leading director sharply; “we have no wish to insult our employés.”

“Only one,” snarled Anson. “Do you call this fair play?”

West drew a breath full of relief, and glanced at Ingleborough, who made no sign, but stood looking stolidly at the officer.

“I’m quite satisfied, gentlemen,” said the latter. “There is nothing here. Do you charge Mr Anson with illicit dealing?”

“You have not searched his apartments yet,” said the chief director. “We wish to have further proofs first.”

Anson opened his mouth a short distance as his chief spoke, and closed it again with a sharp little snap.

“You wish the prisoner’s rooms to be searched then, gentlemen?”

“I’m not a prisoner,” cried Anson angrily. “I’ve neither been charged nor taken into custody.”

“Certainly!” said the director sternly. “Search Mr Anson’s rooms preliminary to his being charged and taken into custody. Mr West, go in front with the superintendent to show the way. I do not wish to make a procession, to create excitement and make us the observed of all.”

“I understand, sir. Mr Anson will walk in advance with me, and you can follow as you please. There is no need for Mr West to walk with us. I know the way!”

“Of course!” snarled Anson. “Mr Ingleborough’s doing, I suppose. Then I have been watched.”

“Yes, my doing,” said the person named. “As soon as I suspected you of illicit dealing I kept an eye upon you and told Mr Norton here what I thought.”

“Cowardly, sneaking cur!” cried Anson, grinding his teeth.

“No, sir,” cried the director sternly: “faithful servant of the company.”

“Where are your proofs that I am not?” cried Anson fiercely.

“Not found yet,” said the officer; “but with all your cunning I daresay we shall trace them.”

“Go on,” said Anson. “I’m ready for you.”

The next minute the whole party were straggling through the camp-like town towards the outskirts, to gather together at the very ordinary shed-like house of mud wall and fluted corrugated-iron roofing, where the wife of one of the men at the mine stared in wonder at the party, and then looked in awe at her lodger, her eyes very wide open and startled as she grasped what the visit meant.

“Oh, Mr Anson, what have you been a-doing of?” she cried, and burst into tears.

West looked at the poor woman with a feeling of pity, and then felt disposed to kick Anson for his brutality, for the clerk’s gesture was that of an ill-tempered cur: he literally snapped at her.

“Out of the way, you idiot!” he cried, “and let this police-constable and his party come by.”

West saw the directors exchange glances before following the superintendent into the little house, leaving the two clerks to the last, the police-constables remaining watchfully at the door.

“Master Anson is regularly cutting the ground from under him, Ingle,” said West softly.

“Yes: the fool! I take it to be a tacit confession. You don’t think I’ve made a mistake now?”

West shook his head and looked distressed, but said nothing.

“Of course he’ll never come back to us, and he knows it, or he’d never put on this defiant manner. Hark at him!”

For at that moment the object of their thoughts shouted loudly: “Here, you two spies, what are you waiting behind for? Come in and help search the place.”

West frowned and hung back, but Ingleborough laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Come along,” he said; “you must help me to see it through! It isn’t

pleasant, but it’s part of one’s duty.”

The next minute they were in Anson’s combined bed and sitting room, a very ordinary-looking place, with the simplest of furniture and plenty of suggestions all round of spots where an ingenious man might have hidden a little fortune in diamonds; for the mud walls were lined with matchboard, the ceiling was of the same material, and then there was the floor, where in any part a board could have been lifted and a receptacle made for the precious crystals, without counting the articles of furniture, including the bedding.

“I’m sorry I have no more chairs, gentlemen,” said the tenant banteringly. “Sit on the table, and three of you can make a sofa of the bed. Never mind tumbling it! You’ll do nothing compared to Mr Superintendent Norton when he begins. I say, though, you should have given me notice of all this, and then I’d have had a carpenter here to skin the walls and ceiling so as to have made everything nice and easy for you. I say, Mr Norton, you’ll want a pickaxe and shovel directly, won’t you?”

The directors had paid no heed to the speaker’s bantering remarks, but the superintendent was getting hot, tired, and annoyed by the constant chatter of the man he was longing to arrest; and, though he had treated everything so far with calm indifference, his lack of success in his search for something incriminating in such places as experience had taught him were in favour with those who carried on diamond-smuggling began now to tell upon his temper, and he turned sharply upon the speaker: to snap out words which showed that his thoughts ran on all-fours with those of Ingleborough.

“Look here, young man!” he said; “I don’t know whether you are aware of it, but you are hard at work building up a black case against yourself, and if you’re not careful you’ll find yourself before long working out your two years as a convict on the Cape Town breakwater.”

“I shall!” cried Anson. “What for? Where’s your evidence? You’ve got a jumped-up cock-and-bull story made by a fellow-clerk who says one thing while I say another. You’ve only his word for it. You’ve found no diamonds on me, and you’ve found none in my lodgings.”

“Not yet,” said the superintendent meaningly.

“Oh, I see! Not yet! Go on, then, pray! I’m not paid by time, so I can afford to lose a few hours. Search away! Perhaps our clever friend Ingleborough can tell you where to look. Perhaps he wouldn’t like to, though. It would hurt his feelings to accuse a brother-clerk of being an illicit trader. But don’t mind me, Ingle. It’s good sport for you. Why don’t you help, and think you’re a good little boy playing at ‘hot boiled beans and very good butter’ again? Now then, Norton’s going across to the other side. You should call out ‘colder’ when he’s going away from the place, and ‘warmer’ when he gets nearer. Then ‘hot,’ and last of all ‘burning.’ Come, keep up the game!”

“I should just like to ram that pair of clean socks between your teeth, my fine fellow, and keep it there with a leather strap,” muttered the officer; and, as if about to put his wish into practice, he stooped and picked up the closely rolled-up pair of socks lying with some other articles of attire placed freshly washed upon a shelf by Anson’s landlady.

“Now then,” cried Anson boisterously, “cry ‘burning,’ somebody: there must be some diamonds inside that!”

The directors frowned, and Ingleborough and West looked on angrily as the officer dashed the soft woollen ball back upon the heap and then went on with his search for nearly an hour.

By this time the lookers-on were as much disgusted as the superintendent.

“I’m very sorry, gentlemen,” he cried; “but I can do no more. There is nothing else to be done unless we have my men in and regularly strip the wood-work down.”

“Oh, pray have them in, then,” cried Anson. “If I were you I’d—”

“Silence, sir!” cried the chief director fiercely, and Anson stared. “We have not the slightest doubt of your guilt. Your conduct all through has proved it. That will do, Mr Norton.”

“You think the evidence sufficient to justify an arrest, gentlemen?”

“We will consult together,” replied the director who had just spoken, “and communicate our decision to you.”

“What, aren’t you satisfied yet?” cried Anson mockingly.

“Quite,” replied his chief; “and of course, sir, your post is vacant. For the present, Mr Norton, you will keep an eye upon this man, and see that he does not leave the town.”

“Unless I’m very much mistaken, sir,” said the superintendent, “neither our friend here nor anyone else will leave Kimberley for some time to come.”

“Is it so bad as that?”

“Yes, sir. The Boers are gradually closing in, I am told. But I’ll keep an eye on Mr Anson here all the same.”

Five minutes later the party were on their way back to the mine buildings, where the first thing that West heard was that the Boers were gathering in great force, and, as far as could be judged, were making the Diamond City their objective.

Troubles were gathering fast, and news kept on coming hotter and hotter.

West and Ingleborough were back in their places at the office, talking over the war news and mingling with it the scenes they had just gone through.

“Norton promised me he’d call in here when he left the governors,” said Ingleborough.

“Then he must have forgotten it,” replied West, “for he has been with them quite an hour. I say, I didn’t know that you were such a friend of the superintendent.”

“Well, I’m not in the habit of talking much,” said Ingleborough, smiling. “But I do like him; he’s such a straightforward, manly fellow, and I take so much interest in the way he runs down criminals. I often wish I had joined the detectives who have this diamond-smuggling in hand.”

“Pst! here he is!” said West quickly, for there were steps outside, and directly after a sharp rap at the door.

“May I come in, Ingleborough?”

“Yes. *Entrez*! West said you’d gone.”

“Did he? You knew I was not?”

Ingleborough nodded.

“What have they decided?” he asked.

“To let the matter drift for the present: only I’m to keep an eye on the scoundrel. They say that we shall all have our hands full enough directly in strengthening the town, and they’re right. I’m afraid we’re going to have a warm time.”

“Think they’ll attack us?” asked West.

“Safe to. Now’s the time for you volunteers to show what you’re made of, for I believe that the enemy will make straight for Kimberley. Our getting the diamond-fields has always been a sore point with them, and we shall have our work cut out to save them.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough thoughtfully, “and if I’m not mistaken, you’ll have more cause to watch Anson than for smuggling. He has his knife into the company.”

“Exactly,” said Norton; “and if he can make friends with and help the enemy, he will.”

“You mean he’ll be a dangerous spy in the camp?” said West excitedly.

“That’s it, Mr West; but if he plays that game and is caught his punishment will not be a couple of years on the breakwater.”

“No,” said Ingleborough: “the military will deal with him then.”

“How?” asked West, whose veins began to tingle and a cold shuddering

sensation to run down his spine.

“A couple of lines of infantry, a volley of musketry, and—”

“Finis,” said the superintendent. “Good day. I don’t wish him any harm; but I feel pretty sure he’ll run straight into some trap. That sort of fellow always does.”

The next minute the door had closed upon the superintendent, and the two young men sat thoughtfully looking in each other’s eyes.

“Only a few hours ago, and we three were calmly working together,” said West sadly; “and I looked upon Anson as an unsatisfactory fellow whom I never could like, but whose worst faults were being a cringing kind of bore and a perfect nuisance with his flute.”

“And I as a smooth hypocrite whom one ought not to trust,” said Ingleborough.

“And now he’s gone, and we’re to have the Boers at us and most likely have to soldier in real earnest. Hallo! Here’s Norton back again.”

For there was a quick step outside, and the door was thrown open. But it was not the superintendent’s face that met their eyes, for their late fellow-clerk stepped boldly in.

“How are you, gentlemen?” he said, with a strong emphasis upon the last word. “So I’ve got the sack; but I’m not going to leave my property behind.”

He stepped to his desk and took out his flute-case, tucked it under his arm, and then drew the sword-cane and umbrella from the stand, giving the pair a maliciously triumphant look.

“Can’t afford to leave the sword-stick as a memento for you, Ingle, nor the flute for sneaky West. Goodbye, both of you. Look out for our next merry meeting. Ta, ta!”

Neither of the young men replied, but sat gazing fixedly at the speaker till he passed out, banging the door.

But only to open it again to look in and utter the one word: “Cads!”

Then the door was banged, and West leaped from his stool and made a dash.

“Stop, stupid!” thundered out Ingleborough, supplementing his words by a bound and flinging his arm round his companion’s chest. “Let the brute go. You don’t want to kick him?”

“But I do,” shouted West, struggling. “Let go.”

“Keep still,” growled Ingleborough, and then, “Why, Noll,” he cried, “I do believe—”

“What?” said West, cooling down and looking wonderingly in his companion’s excited eyes, for Ingleborough had stopped short.

“That flute—that sword-cane—”

“Well, he has got them. Bah! I’m glad you stopped me from punching his head. Let him have them; they’re his.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough; “but the handle of the cane and the top joint of the flute. There was room for a dozen big diamonds in each.”

“What! Then let’s go and stop him!”

“Yes; we could but be wrong. Come on.”

“Hah! Listen,” cried West, and a sound arose which turned their thoughts in a different channel, for it was like the first note of the coming war.

The trumpet rang out the “assemblée” and thrilled both through and through, sending them to the arm-press for rifle and bandolier.

Clerking was over for many months to come. The pen was to give way to the modern substitute for the sword.

Chapter Eight.

Volunteers Volunteer.

Rumours that proved to be false and rumours that proved to be true were plentiful enough during the following fortnight; and in that time Kimberley was transformed from a busy mining camp in which the black and white inhabitants were constantly going and coming like ants in a hill to a town whose siege was imminent, and whose people thought of nothing but preparing for the enemy, and whose talk was of rifle, cartridge, and trench.

But there was something done beside talk, the people loyally joining with the small military garrison in preparing for the defence of the place; and, while one portion worked to strengthen every spot that would form a redoubt, the other strove as long as was possible to get in stores to enable the defenders to hold out if they were besieged. For the determination was strong to save the enormous wealth of the place from the enemy whose borders were so short a distance from their lines.

Drilling and instruction in the use of arms were carried on almost night and day, and in a very short time the military element seemed to have pretty well swallowed up the civil, while each hour found the people more ready to meet the first rush of the dogs of war.

It was a most unsuitable place for defence, being a mere mining camp pitched in a wide bare plain, the only part suitable for turning into a keep being the huge mound cast up by the excavations in the search for diamonds; and this was fortified to the best of the defenders' ability almost from the first. But the situation had its advantages as well as failings, for the flat, open, desert-like land stretched right away on all sides, giving an enemy no undue advantages in the shape of kopje or ravine to turn into a natural fortress from which the town could be attacked.

The place, then, was a fair example of weakness and strength, the latter, however, daily growing, in the shape of a stern determination to give the Boers a very warm reception when they did attack.

So the days glided rapidly by, with authentic news at first fairly abundant, but invariably of a very serious nature, and whenever they were off the

new duties they had to fulfil, the said news was amply discussed by the two young men, who from their prior preparation had stood forward at once as prominent members of the semi-military force.

“Be patient,” said Ingleborough laughingly, one evening; “there’ll be plenty of fighting by-and-by. I’d no idea you were going to develop into such a fire-eater.”

“Fire-eater? Absurd! I only feel deeply interested in all we are doing.”

“That’s right, Noll! So do we all; but let’s have no rashness. Remember all the drill and discipline. That’s where we shall be able to tell against the enemy. They can use their rifles well enough; but they are an undisciplined mob at the best. By the way, have you run against the flute-player lately?”

“No, but I met the people with whom he lodges yesterday. They knew me again, and came up as if wanting to speak.”

“What about?”

“Oh, they began by talking about the war and asking me whether I thought it would last long.”

“To which you said *No*, eh?”

“I only said that I hoped not, and then they volunteered the information that they believed Anson was going to leave the town for the south.”

“Indeed?” said Ingleborough sharply. “What made them think that?”

“Because their lodger had packed up all his little belongings and had bought a wagon and a span of oxen, which he kept just outside.”

“Well, he’ll lose them if he doesn’t look out. He’ll find himself between two fires. Either the oxen will be seized for stores, or the Boers will cut them off. The fellow must be either desperate or mad.”

“In a fright, I should say,” said West. “I don’t think he would stomach the fighting.”

“Oh, it’s all nonsense! The report this evening was that the Boers are closing round us fast. He’ll be stopped by one side or the other. Norton ought to know of this, though.”

“I daresay he does know already,” said West; “for he told me the other day that he was keeping his eye on our friend.”

“So he did,” said Ingleborough thoughtfully. “He has some idea of catching him trying to communicate with the enemy. If he does, Master Simon will not get off so easily as he did over the diamond business. Well, I’m tired, and I shall go to bed. Let’s sleep while we can. There’s no knowing what a day will bring forth!”

“You are right,” said West. “You think we shall really come to close quarters?”

“Yes, and very close quarters too. I’ve expected it before now.”

Nothing happens so surely as the unexpected, someone once said; and it was so the very next day.

Military drill was, as intimated, constantly going on; but that next morning there was a larger gathering than usual, the principal part of the regulars being drawn up in lines with the volunteer defenders—in all, a goodly show.

It was to some extent a general inspection; but after it was over the men were formed up as three sides of a hollow square, and the Colonel in command addressed the men, complimenting them upon their behaviour, and then giving them the contents in a great measure of the despatches he had received from headquarters, in combination with the reports of the scouts and from the outposts. He concluded by saying that in a few hours they would, in all probability, be completely shut off from communication with the south, for the Boers were closing round them in great force, and that until they were relieved they would be called upon to hold Kimberley, making a brave defence to save so important a town from falling into the hands of the invader.

Here he was stopped by a tremendous burst of cheering, which hindered him from saying, as he intended, that they must be of good heart and full

of trust that the General in command would soon send help.

But the enthusiastic cheering taught the Commandant plainly that the men before him needed no “heartening up,” and he smiled with satisfaction as he felt convinced that every call he made upon them would be answered.

What followed was short and to the point. He thanked them, made a few remarks about his determination that no Boers should drag the British flag from where it fluttered, told the garrison that he was proud to say that they had an ample supply of provisions and military stores, and that the Boers had only to make their first attack to find how they had deceived themselves about the British surrender at Majuba Hill.

Here there was another deafening burst of cheers.

Finally he made a fresh allusion to the well-known town farther north which was being surrounded by the enemy even as they were being shut in there.

“It will be a race,” he said, “between us as to which town will first beat the Boers off; and the victors will then have the glorious task of going to the relief of the others.”

After this the regulars were marched off to their quarters, leaving the volunteers standing fast; and the Commandant now summoned their officers to his side.

As it happened, this was within a few yards of the spot where West and Ingleborough were drawn up in the line, and every word the Commandant spoke came to them clear and plain.

“I have another little business to speak about, gentlemen,” he said, “in connection with a second despatch which was enclosed to me this morning within my own. It is a letter of instructions I am ordered to convey to our brave brother-in-arms now in command at Mafeking; and, on thinking the matter over, I concluded that it would be unwise to select one of my own men to carry that despatch, from their want of knowledge of the country and people, and far better to apply to you gentlemen to recommend to me a thoroughly trustworthy man or two, who, regardless

of all obstacles, would carry the despatch, bringing to bear force or cunning so as to evade the enemy's scouts, for the road is sure to swarm with them, even if it is not occupied by the Boers in force. It is possible, too, that Mafeking may be completely invested when he or they reach its neighbourhood; but I must have a despatch-rider who will look upon even that as a trifle to be overcome or crossed, and who will not rest until the despatch is safely placed in Colonel Baden-Powell's hands. Let me be fully understood: I want messengers who will be ready to fight if necessary or fly if needs be, but only to rebound and try in another direction—in short, men who will button up this despatch and say: 'It shall be placed in Baden-Powell's hands by hook or crook as soon as a swift horse can cover the ground.' This is what I want, and it is urgent, or it would not be placed in my hands to deliver with such stern commands. It means life or death to hundreds, if not thousands. So now then, whom do you know that will, with the assistance of a brave comrade, risk his life and carry my despatch?"

A dead silence, which lasted many seconds, fell upon the group, but at last the volunteer Colonel spoke out.

"I am not prepared to name anyone, sir," he said, "and I flinch from sending any man in my regiment upon so terribly perilous a journey, for it means almost to a certainty being shot down, for the bearer of the despatch will be bound to hurry on and pay no heed to challenges to stop."

"Certainly," said the Commandant, frowning; "but surely—"

"One moment, sir; I was about to say that the fairest way would be to call for volunteers, and then select the two most likely men."

"Well," said the Commandant, "do that then, and let the men fully understand that it is a most dangerous task. Mind, too, that he must be a good and a rather reckless rider, able to bear fatigue, and above all determined to do this thing for the honour of his country and the saving of his brother men.—Yes, my lad, what is it?"

For West, whose face had flushed deeply and whose blood tingled in his veins, had taken four steps forward out of the ranks, and now stood with

his hand raised to the salute.

“Give me the despatch, sir,” he said. “I’ll take it.”

“You?” cried the Commandant wonderingly, as his eyes ran over the speaker. “You are very young. But are you a good rider?”

“I think I can ride anything well enough, sir.”

“Splendid rider,” said a deep voice, and Ingleborough strode to the young man’s side. “He’ll do it, sir, if any man can; and I’ll go with him to help him in the task if you’ll give me orders.”

“Hah!” ejaculated the Commandant. “Yes, I know you, Mr Ingleborough. You belong to the police?”

“Oh no, sir; I am only on friendly terms with the superintendent, and have been on expeditions with him.”

“And you think your young friend would be a good man to carry the despatch?”

“I would trust him if I were in power, sir.”

“Then I will,” said the Commandant, after a long and searching look at West. “Be at my quarters in fifteen minutes’ time, both of you, and we will have further talk on the matter.”

The young men exchanged looks as they resumed their places in the ranks, West’s countenance betokening the wild excitement he felt, while Ingleborough, who looked perfectly calm and contented, just gave him a smile and a nod.

A few minutes later they were dismissed, and the two young men had hard work to get free from their brother volunteers, who surrounded and cheered them loudly, one of the officers proposing that they should be chaired back through the town. But they escaped this on the ground of their orders to go to the Commandant’s quarters, and were at last set free, to hurry away. The next minute they encountered Anson, who had heard and seen all, and passed them without a word, but wearing a

peculiarly supercilious and meaning smile which broadened into a grin of contempt that made West writhe.

“Bless him!” said Ingleborough. “Do you know what the pleasant look means?”

“That he will not be happy till I’ve thrashed him.”

“No,” said Ingleborough; “he has evidently heard all, and has made up his mind that he is going to have a pleasant revenge.”

“How? In what way?” cried West.

“He thinks the Boers will shoot us: that’s all.”

“Ah!” cried West.

“But we will not let them, my dear boy,” said Ingleborough coolly. “They’re slim, as they call it; but two can play at that game.”

“Yes, but look: here’s Mr Allan coming to say that we can’t go,” said West excitedly, for the chief director was approaching and raised his hand to stop them, signing to them directly after to come to his side.

“Looks as if he is going to put a stopper on our patriotism,” growled Ingleborough. “We’ve been reckoning without our host.”

Chapter Nine.

Four-Legged Help.

“Here, you two boys,” cried the director; “I’ve just heard of this wild project. Are you mad, West?”

“I hope not, sir.”

“But, my good lad, I really—I—that is—bless my soul! It’s very brave of you; but I don’t think I ought to let you go.”

“I heard you say, sir, that everyone ought to be ready to devote his life to the defence of the country.”

“Eh?” cried the director. “To be sure, yes, I did—in that speech I made to the volunteers; but then you’re not everybody, and—er—er—you see, what I said was in a speech, and sometimes one says more then than one quite means.”

“There’ll be no work doing in the office, sir,” said Ingleborough; “and I hope you will not place any obstacles in the way of our going.”

“Oh no, my dear boys! I feel that I must not; but I don’t like you to run such a terrible risk.”

“We must all run risks, sir,” said West gravely.

“And I beg your pardon: our time is up for seeing the Commandant,” said Ingleborough, referring to his watch.

“Yes, I heard you were to go to him,” said the director. “But it sounds very rash. There, go on, and come to me afterwards.”

They parted, and a few minutes later the young men were ushered into the Commandant’s room.

“Then you have not repented, my lads?” he said, smiling.

“No, sir,” replied West, speaking for both; “we are quite ready to go.”

“Then I must take you both at your word. But once more I give you both the opportunity to draw back if you like.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied West; “but if you will trust us we will take the despatch.”

“Very well,” said the Commandant, turning very stern and business-like. “Here is the despatch. It is a very small packet, and I leave it to your own ingenuity to dispose of it where it cannot be found if you have the bad luck to be captured. It must be sewn up in your pockets, or fitted into your hats, or hidden in some way or other. I leave it to you, only telling you to

destroy it sooner than it should fall into the enemy's hands."

"We'll consult together, sir, and decide what to do," replied West, looking frankly in the officer's eyes; "but—I have heard of such a thing being done, sir—"

"What do you mean?" said the Commandant sternly.

"That to ensure a despatch not falling into the enemy's hands the bearer learned its contents carefully and then burned it."

"Hah! Yes. That would make it safe," cried the officer, with a satisfied look. "But, no, it could not be done in this case. I have no right to open the despatch, and I do not know its contents. You must take it as it is, and in the event of disaster burn or bury it. Destroy it somehow. It must not fall into the enemy's hands. Here."

"I understand, sir," said West, taking the thick letter in its envelope, as it was extended to him; and the Commandant heaved a sigh as if of relief on being freed of a terrible incubus.

"There," he said, "I shall tie you down to no restrictions other than these. That packet must somehow be placed in the hands of the Colonel Commandant at Mafeking. I do not like to name failure, for you are both young, strong, and evidently full of resource; but once more: if you are driven too hard, burn or destroy the packet. Now then, what do you want in the way of arms? You have your rifles, and you had better take revolvers, which you can have with ammunition from the military stores. Do you want money?"

"No, sir; we shall require no money to signify," said Ingleborough quietly. "But we must have the best horses that can be obtained."

"Those you must provide for yourselves. Take the pick of the place, and the order shall be made for payment. My advice is that you select as good a pair of Basuto ponies as you can obtain. They will be the best for your purpose. There, I have no more to say but 'God speed you,' for it is a matter of life and death."

He shook hands warmly with both, and, on glancing back as soon as they

were outside, they saw the Commandant watching them from the window, whence he waved his hand.

“He thinks we shall never get back again, Noll,” said Ingleborough, smiling; “but we’ll deceive him. Now then, what next?”

“We must see Mr Allan,” replied West.

“Then forward,” cried Ingleborough. “We must see old Norton too before we go, or he’ll feel huffed. Let’s go round by his place.”

They found the superintendent in and ready to shake hands with them both warmly.

“Most plucky!” he kept on saying. “Wish I could go with you.”

“I wish you could, and with a hundred of your men to back us up,” said West laughingly.

“You ought to have a couple of thousand to do any good!” said the superintendent: “but even they would not ensure your delivering your despatch. By rights there ought to be only one of you. That would increase your chance. But it would be lonely work. What can I do for you before you go?”

“Only come and see us off this evening.”

“I will,” was the reply, “and wish you safe back.”

“And, I say,” said Ingleborough: “keep your eye on that scoundrel.”

“Anson? Oh yes: trust me! I haven’t done with that gentleman yet.”

Directly after they were on their way to the director’s room, and as they neared the door they could hear him pacing impatiently up and down as if suffering from extreme anxiety.

The step ceased as they reached and gave a tap at the door, and Mr Allan opened to them himself.

“Well,” he said, “has the Commandant decided to send you?”

“Yes, sir,” replied West.

“I’m very sorry, and I’m very glad; for it must be done, and I know no one more likely to get through the Boer lines than you two. Look here, you’ll want money. Take these. No questions, no hesitation, my lads; buckle on the belts beneath your waistcoats. Money is the sinews of war, and you are going where you will want sinews and bones, bones and sinews too.”

In his eagerness the director helped the young men to buckle on the two cash-belts he had given them.

“There,” he said; “that is all I can do for you but wish you good luck. By the time you come back we shall have sent the Boers to the right-about, unless they have captured Kimberley and seized the diamond-mines. Then, of course, my occupation will be gone. Goodbye. Not hard-hearted, my boys; but rather disposed to be soft. There, goodbye.”

“Now then,” said West, “we’ve no time to spare. What are we going to do about horses?”

“We’ve the money at our back,” replied Ingleborough, “and that will do anything. We are on Government service too, so that if we cannot pay we can pick out what we like and then report to headquarters, when they will be requisitioned.”

But the task proved easy enough, for they had not gone far in the direction of the mines when they met another of the directors, who greeted them both warmly.

“I’ve heard all about it, my lads,” he said, “and it’s very brave of you both.”

“Please don’t say that any more, sir,” cried West appealingly, “for all we have done yet is talk. If we do get the despatch through there will be some praise earned, but at present we’ve done nothing.”

“And we’re both dreadfully modest, sir,” said Ingleborough.

“Bah! you’re not great girls,” cried the director. “But you are not off yet,

and you can't walk."

"No, sir," said West; "we are in search of horses—good ones that we can trust to hold out."

"Very well; why don't you go to someone who has been buying up horses for our mounted men?"

"Because we don't know of any such person," said West. "Do you?"

"To be sure I do, my lad, and here he is."

"You, sir?" cried Ingleborough excitedly. "Why, of course; I heard that you were, and forgot in all the bustle and excitement of the coming siege. Then you can let us have two? The Commandant will give an order for the payment."

"Hang the Commandant's payments!" cried the director testily. "When young fellows like you are ready to give their lives in the Queen's service, do you think men like we are can't afford to mount them? Come along with me, and you shall have the pick of the sturdy cob ponies I have. They're rough, and almost unbroken—what sort of horsemen are you?"

"Very bad, sir," replied Ingleborough: "no style at all. We ride astride though."

"Well, so I suppose," said the director, laughing, "and with your faces to the nag's head. If you tell me you look towards the tail I shall not believe you. But seriously, can you stick on a horse tightly when at full gallop?"

"Oliver West can, sir," replied Ingleborough. "He's a regular centaur foal."

"Nonsense! Don't flatter," cried West. "I can ride a bit, sir; but Ingleborough rides as if he were part of a horse. He's accustomed to taking long rides across the veldt every morning."

"Oh, we can ride, sir," said Ingleborough coolly; "but whether we can ride well enough to distance the Boers has to be proved."

"I'll mount you, my boys, on such a pair of ponies as the Boers haven't

amongst them," said the director warmly. "Do you know my stables—the rough ones and enclosure I have had made?"

"We heard something about the new stabling near the mine, sir," said West; "but we've been too busy to pay much heed."

"Come and pay heed now, then."

The speaker led the way towards the great mine buildings, and halted at a gate in a newly set-up fence of corrugated-iron, passing through which their eyes were gladdened by the sight of about a dozen of the rough, sturdy little cobs bred by the Basutos across country, and evidently under the charge of a couple of Kaffirs, who came hurrying up at the sight of their "baas," as they termed him.

Here Ingleborough soon displayed the knowledge he had picked up in connection with horses by selecting two clever-looking muscular little steeds, full of spirit and go, but quite ready to prove how little they had been broken in, and promising plenty of work to their riders if they expected to keep in their saddles.

"Be too fresh for you?" said the owner.

"We shall soon take the freshness out of them, poor things!" said Ingleborough. "Would you mind having them bridled and saddled, sir?"

The order was given, and, after a good deal of trouble and narrowly escaping being kicked, the Kaffirs brought the pair selected up to where the despatch-riders were standing with the director.

Ingleborough smiled, and then bade the two Kaffirs to stand on the far side of the ponies, which began to resent the Kaffirs' flank movements by sidling up towards the two young men.

"Ready?" said Ingleborough, in a low, sharp tone.

"Yes."

"Mount!"

They both sprang into their saddles, to the intense astonishment of the ponies, one of which made a bound and dashed off round the enclosure at full speed, while the other, upon which West was mounted, reared straight up, and, preserving its balance upon its hind legs, kept on snorting, while it sparred out with its fore hoofs as if striking at some imaginary enemy, till the rider brought his hand down heavily upon the restive beast's neck. The blow acted like magic, for the pony dropped on all-fours directly, gave itself a shake as if to rid itself of saddle and rider, and then uttered a loud neigh which brought its galloping companion alongside.

"Humph!" ejaculated their new friend; "I needn't trouble myself about your being able to manage your horses, my lads. Will these do?"

"Splendidly, sir," cried West.

"There they are, then, at your service!" And, after a few directions to the Kaffirs about having them ready when wanted, the party left the enclosure and separated with a few friendly words, the despatch-bearers making once more for the Commandant's quarters to report what they had done so far, and to obtain a pass which would ensure them a ready passage through the lines and by the outposts.

They were soon ushered into the Commandant's presence, and he nodded his satisfaction with the report of their proceedings before taking up a pen and writing a few lines upon an official sheet of paper.

"That will clear you both going and returning," said he, folding and handing the permit. "Now then, when do you start?"

"Directly, sir," said Ingleborough, who was the one addressed.

"No," said the Commandant. "You must wait a few hours. Of course it is important that the despatch be delivered as soon as possible; but you must lose time sooner than run risks. If you go now, you will be seen by the enemy and be having your horses shot down—perhaps share their fate. So be cautious, and now once more goodbye, my lads. I shall look forward to seeing you back with an answering despatch."

This was their dismissal, and they hurried away to have another look to

their horses, and to see that they were well-fed, before obtaining a meal for themselves and a supply of food to store in their haversacks.

“There’s nothing like a bit of foresight,” said Ingleborough. “We must eat, and going in search of food may mean capture and the failure of our mission.”

The time was gliding rapidly on, the more quickly to West from the state of excitement he was in; but the only important thing he could afterwards remember was that twice over they ran against Anson, who seemed to be watching their actions, and the second time West drew his companion’s attention to the fact.

“Wants to see us off,” said Ingleborough. “I shouldn’t be surprised when we come back to find that he has eluded Norton and gone.”

“Where?” said West.

“Oh, he’ll feel that his chance here is completely gone, and he’ll make for the Cape and take passage for England.”

“If the Boers do not stop him.”

“Of course,” replied Ingleborough. “It’s my impression that he has smuggled a lot of diamonds, though we couldn’t bring it home to him.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” said West thoughtfully. “But isn’t it likely that he may make his way over to the enemy?”

Ingleborough looked at the speaker sharply.

“That’s not a bad idea of yours,” he said slowly; “but, if he does and he is afterwards caught, things might go very awkwardly for his lordship, and that flute of his will be for sale.”

“Flute for sale? What do you mean? From poverty?—no one would employ him. Oh! I understand now. Horrible! You don’t think our people would shoot him?”

“Perhaps not,” said Ingleborough coldly; “but they’d treat him as a rebel

and a spy. But there, it's pretty well time we started. Come along."

Within half an hour they were mounted and off on their perilous journey, passing outpost after outpost and having to make good use of their pass, till, just as it was getting dusk, they parted from an officer who rode out with them towards the Boers' encircling lines.

"There," he said, "you've got the enemy before you, and you'd better give me your pass."

"Why?" said West sharply.

"Because it has been a source of protection so far: the next time you are challenged it will be a danger."

"Of course," said Ingleborough. "Give it up, Oliver."

"Or destroy it," said the officer carelessly: "either will do."

"Thanks for the advice," said West, and they shook hands and parted, the officer riding back to join his men.

"You made him huffy by being suspicious," said Ingleborough.

"I'm sorry, but one can't help being suspicious of everything and everybody at a time like this. What do you say about destroying the Commandant's pass?"

"I'm divided in my opinion."

"So am I," said West. "One moment I think it best: the next I am for keeping it in case we fall into the hands of some of our own party. On the whole, I think we had better keep it and hide it. Let's keep it till we are in danger."

"Chance it?" said Ingleborough laconically. "Very well; only don't leave it till it is too late."

"I'll mind," said West, and, as they rode out over the open veldt and into the gloom of the falling night, they kept a sharp look-out till they had to

trust more to their ears for notice of danger, taking care to speak only in a whisper, knowing as they did that at any moment they might receive a challenge from the foe.

“What are you doing?” said Ingleborough suddenly, after trying to make out what his companion was doing. “Not going to eat yet, surely?”

“No—only preparing for the time when I must. Look here.”

“Too dark,” said Ingleborough, leaning towards his companion.

“Very well, then, I’ll tell you: I’m making a sandwich.”

“Absurd! What for?”

“I’ll tell you. You can’t see, but this is what I’m doing. I’ve two slices of bread here, and I’m putting between them something that is not good food for Boers. That’s it. I’ve doubled the pass in half, and stuck it between two slices. If we have the bad luck to be taken prisoners I shall be very hungry, and begin eating the sandwich and the pass. I don’t suppose it will do me any harm.”

“Capital idea,” said Ingleborough, laughing.

“That’s done,” said West, replacing his paper sandwich in his haversack, and a few minutes later, as they still rode slowly on, Ingleborough spoke again.

“What now?” he said.

“Making another sandwich,” was the reply.

“Another?”

“Yes, of the Mafeking despatch.”

“Ah, of course; but you will not eat that?”

“Only in the last extremity.”

“Good,” said Ingleborough, “and I hope we shall have no last extremes.”

He had hardly spoken when a sharp challenge in Boer-Dutch rang out, apparently from about fifty yards to their left, and, as if in obedience to the demand, the two Basuto ponies the young men rode stopped suddenly.

Ingleborough leaned down sidewise and placed his lips close to his companion's ear.

"Which is it to be?" he said. "One is as easy as the other—forward or back?"

"One's as safe as the other," replied West, under his breath. "Forward."

They were in the act of pressing their horses' sides to urge them on when there was a flash of light from the position of the man who had uttered the challenge, and almost immediately the humming, buzzing sound as of a large beetle whizzing by them in its nocturnal flight, and at the same moment there was the sharp crack of a rifle.

Chapter Ten.

Anson's Blessing.

"Bless 'em!" said Anson to himself that same evening, "I don't wish 'em any harm. I only hope that before they've gone far the Boers will challenge them.

"I can almost see it now: getting dark, and an outpost challenges. 'Come on, gallop!' says old Ingle, and they stick their spurs into their nags and are off over the veldt. Then *crack, cracky crack*, go the rifles till the saddles are emptied and two gallant defenders of Kimberley and brave despatch-riders lie kicking in the dust.

"Ugh! How. I should like to be there with my flute. I'd stand and look on till they'd given their last kick and stretched themselves out straight, and then I'd play the 'Dead March' in 'Saul' all over 'em both. Don't suppose they'd know; but if they could hear it they wouldn't sneer at my 'tootling old flute'—as Ingle called it—any more.

"Urrrr! I hated the pair of 'em. Ingle was a hound—a regular sniffing, smelling-out hound, and Noll West a miserable, sneaking cur. Beasts! So very good and nice and straightforward. Hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth—yes, millions' worth of diamonds being scraped together by the company, and a poor fellow not allowed to have a handful. I don't say it's the thing to steal 'em; but who would steal? Just a bit of nice honest trade—buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest. It's what the company does, but nobody else ought to, of course. Who's going to ask every Kaffir who comes to you and says: 'Buy a few stones, baas?' 'Where do you get 'em from?' Not me. They've as good a right to 'em as the company, and if I like to do a bit of honest trade I will, in spite of the miserable laws they make. Hang their laws! What are they to me? Illicit-diamond-buying! Police force, eh? A snap of the fingers for it!

"A bit sooner than I expected," mused the flute-player. "A few months more, and I should have made a very big thing if the Boers hadn't upset it all and Master Ingle hadn't been so precious clever! Never mind: it isn't so very bad now! I'll be off while my shoes are good. I don't believe the

Boers have got round to the south yet, and, if they have, I don't believe it'll matter. Say they do stop me, it'll only be: 'Who are you—and where are you going?' Down south or west or anywhere, to do a bit of trade. I'm sloping off—that's what I'm doing—because the British are trying to force me to volunteer to fight against my old friends the Boers. I'll soft-soap and butter 'em all over, and play 'em a tune or two upon the flute, and offer 'em some good tobacco. They won't stop me."

The quiet, plump, thoughtful-looking muser was on his way to a farm just beyond the outskirts of Kimberley, as he walked slowly through the darkness, hardly passing a soul; and he rubbed his hands softly at last as he came in sight of a dim gleaming lantern some distance ahead.

"All ready and waiting," he said softly, and now he increased his pace a little in his excitement, but only to stop short and look back once or twice as if to make sure that he was not followed. But, neither seeing nor hearing anything, he rubbed his hands again, muttered to himself something about wiping his shoes of the whole place, and went on quickly.

"Das you, baas?" said a thick guttural voice just above the lantern.

"Yes, this is me," replied Anson. "Team in-spanned?"

"Yaas, baas: big long time ago. Not tink baas come."

"But I said I would," replied Anson. "Got the water-barrel slung underneath?"

The man grunted, Anson gave an order or two in a low tone, and in response to a shout a dimly-seen team of great bullocks roughly harnessed to the dissel boom and trek tow of a long covered-in wagon began to trudge slowly along over the rough track which led to the main road leading south. A second man led the way, while the Kaffir with the light swung himself up onto the great box in front of the wagon and drew out an unusually long whip, after hanging his horn lantern to a hook in the middle of the arched tilt over his head.

"Baas come alon' heah?" said the man.

“No, go on, and I’ll walk behind for a bit,” said Anson, in a low tone of voice. “Go on quietly, and keep off the track. Go straight away till I tell you to turn off.”

The Kaffir grunted, and the oxen plodded on at their slow two-mile-an-hour rate, leaving the last sign of occupation far behind, Anson twice over giving instructions to the man who was leading which way to steer, the result being that the creaking wagon was driven right away south and west over the open veldt, avoiding the various farms and places till Kimberley was left far behind.

It was a bright starlit night, and the long procession of big bullocks looked weird and strange in the gloom, for at times they seemed to be drawing nothing, so closely did the tilt of the great lightly-loaded wagon assimilate with the drab dusty tint of the parched earth and the dusky-coloured scrub which the great wheels crushed down.

The driver sat on the box with his huge whip, his shoulders well up and his head down, driving mechanically, and seeming to be asleep, while the voorlooper kept pace with the leading oxen, and hour after hour passed away without a word being spoken.

So the night wore on, the only watchful eyes being those of Anson, who kept on straining them forward right and left, while his ears twitched as he listened for the sounds which he knew would be uttered by a Boer vedette.

But no challenge came, and the fugitive breathed more freely as the stars paled, a long, low, sickly streak began to spread in the east, and the distance of the wide-spreading desolate veldt grew more clear.

“I knew they wouldn’t be on the look-out,” said Anson to himself, in an exulting fashion. “Hah! I’m all right, and I wonder how West and Ingle have got on.”

It was growing broad daylight when the thoughtful-looking ex-clerk climbed up to the side of the driver.

“How far to the fontein?” he said.

“One hour, baas,” was the reply.

“Is there plenty of grass?”

“Plenty, baas. Bullock much eat and drink.”

The information proved quite correct, for within the specified time—the team having stepped out more readily, guided as they were by their instinct to where water, grass, and rest awaited them—and soon after the great orange globe had risen above what looked like the rim of the world, the wagon was pulled up at the edge of a broad crack in the dusty plain, where the bottom of the spruit could be seen full of rich green grass besprinkled with flowers, through which ran the clear waters of an abundant stream.

A fire was soon lighted, a billy hung over it to boil, and Anson, after watching the team, which had dragged their load so well and so far, munching away at the juicy grass, began to get out the necessaries connected with his own meal.

“Hah!” he said softly, as he rubbed his hands; “sorry I haven’t got my two fellow-clerks to breakfast: it would have been so nice and Ugh!” he growled, shading his eyes to give a final look round, for there in the distance, evidently following the track by which he had come through the night, there was a little knot of horsemen cantering along, and from time to time there came a flash of light caused by the horizontal beams of the sun striking upon rifle-barrel or sword.

Anson’s hands dropped to his sides, and he looked to right, left, and behind him as if meditating flight. Then his eyes went in the direction of his oxen, freshly outspanned, but he turned frowningly away as he felt that even with the team already in their places, the lumbering bullocks could not have been forced into a speed which the horses could not have overtaken in a few yards at a canter.

Then he shaded his eyes again to have a good look at the party of horsemen.

“Police,” he said, in a hiss. “Yes, and that’s Norton. *Hfff*!”

He drew in his breath, making a peculiar sound, and then, as if satisfied with the course he meant to pursue, he went back to the fire and continued his preparations for his meal, apparently paying no heed to the party of mounted police till they cantered up and came to a halt by the wagon.

“Hallo, constables!” cried Anson boisterously; “who’d have thought of seeing—Why, it’s you, Mr Norton!”

“Yes,” said the superintendent. “You seem surprised!”

“Why, of course I am. Got something on the way? Anyone been smuggling stones?”

“Yes,” said the officer shortly.

“Sorry for them then, for I suppose you mean to catch ’em.”

“I do,” said the officer warningly.

“That’s right; I’m just going to have some breakfast: will you have a snack with me?”

“No, thank you. I’m on business.”

“Ah, you are a busy man, Mr Norton; but let bygones be bygones. Have a snack with me! You’re welcome.”

“I told you I was on business, Master Anson. Now, if you please, where are you going?”

“Where am I going?” said Anson warmly. “Why, down south. What’s the good of my staying in Kimberley?”

“I can’t answer that question, sir. Where’s your pass?”

“Pass? What pass?”

“Your permit from the magistrate to leave the town.”

“Permit? Nonsense!” cried Anson. “I’m turned out of the mine offices, and

I’m not going to sit and starve. No one will give me work without a character. You know that.”

The superintendent nodded.

“Perhaps not,” he said; “but you are still a suspect, and you have no right to leave the town.”

“I’m not a prisoner,” said Anson defiantly, “and I’m going on my lawful way. What have you to say to that?”

“In plain English, that I believe you are going off to escape arrest and to carry off your plunder.”

“My what? Plunder? Why, it’s sickening! Didn’t you come to my place and thoroughly search it?”

“I did search your room, but found nothing, because I believe you had everything too well hidden. Now then, if you please, what have you got in your wagon?”

“Nothing but provisions and my clothes! Why?”

“Because of your sudden flight.”

“My sudden what?” said Anson, laughing.

“You know what I said, sir. Your sudden flight!”

“My sudden nonsense!” cried Anson angrily. “I have told you why I came away.”

“Yes,” said the superintendent; “but I’m not satisfied that this move does not mean that you have smuggled diamonds here with you to carry to where you can dispose of them.”

“Well, it’s of no use to argue with a policeman,” said Anson coolly. “You had better make another search.”

Chapter Eleven.

Another Search.

“That’s just what I’m going to do, Master Anson,” was the reply, given sternly.

“All right,” said Anson nonchalantly. “Search away; but, if I was in the police and had a good tip given me as to where the plunder I was after had been planted, I don’t think I should waste time hunting blind leads, and letting the real culprits have plenty of time to get away.”

“But then you are not in the police, sir,” said the superintendent, with a nod. “So first of all I’ll let my men run over you and your Kaffirs.”

“Wait till I’ve lit a cigar first,” said Anson, taking out a case, and then laughing, for the police officer was watching him keenly. “That’s right; there are three or four diamonds in every one of these cigars, and as I smoke you’ll notice that I don’t burn much of the end I light, but that I keep on biting off bits of the leaf till I get to the diamonds, and then I swallow them.”

He held out his cigar-case, and the superintendent took it and began to feel the cigars, till Anson burst out laughing.

“Don’t pinch them too hard,” he cried, “or you’ll break them, and then they won’t draw.”

The officer returned the cigar-case with an angry ejaculation, and glanced round as if hesitating where to begin, while the horses of his men began to imitate the action of the oxen, nibbling away at the rich grass surrounding the pleasant spring.

“I say, Robert,” said Anson, and the superintendent started at the familiar nickname: “I’d look smart over the business, for the Boers have been here lately to water their horses, and if they should by any chance come back it might mean a journey for you and your men to Pretoria.”

“And you too, if they did come,” said the officer surlily.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Anson airily. “I don’t believe they would stop a man with an empty wagon going south on a peaceful journey.”

“They’d take you and your wagon and span, sir,” said the officer sternly.

“Look here, I don’t believe the Boers would behave half so badly to me as my own people have done. But aren’t you going to search?”

“Yes,” said the superintendent sharply. “Your rifle, please.”

Anson unslung it from where it hung in the wagon, and the officer took it, examined the stock and the plate at the end of the butt, to be sure that there were no secret places scooped out of the wood, before he opened the breech and withdrew the ball cartridges, holding the empty barrels up to his eyes.

“That’s right,” cried Anson; “but have a good look round for squalls—I mean Boers. Gun-barrels don’t make half bad things to squint through when you haven’t got a binocular.”

“Bah!” said the superintendent angrily, replacing the cartridges and closing the breech with a snap. “But you have a pair of glasses slung across your shoulder, sir. Have the goodness to pass the case here.”

Anson obeyed willingly enough, giving his slung case up for the rifle that was returned.

“There you are,” he said, “and when you’ve done I suppose you’d like to search my clothes and my skin. But I haven’t anything there, and I haven’t cut myself to slip diamonds inside my hide, and there are none in my ears or boots.”

“It’s my duty to have you searched all the same,” said the superintendent. “Here, two of you go carefully over Mr Anson, while you three hitch up your horses there and make a close search throughout the wagon.”

Anson chuckled as the men began promptly to pass their hands over his clothes, turn out his pockets, and haul off his boots, their chief, after satisfying himself that the binocular case had no false bottom or precious stones inside the instrument itself, looking searchingly on.

Satisfied at last that his captive had nothing concealed about him, and frowning heavily at the malicious grin of contempt in which Anson indulged, the superintendent turned to the men examining the oxen so as to satisfy himself that none of the heavy dull brutes had been provided with false horns riveted over their own and of greater length so as to allow room for a few diamonds in each.

Then the dissel boom was examined to see if it had been bored out somewhere and plugged to cover the illicitly-acquired diamonds thrust in.

But no: the great pole of the wagon was perfectly solid; there were no stones stuck in the grease used to anoint the wheels; there was no sign anywhere outside the wagon of boring or plugging; and at last the superintendent, after carefully avoiding Anson's supercilious grin, turned to give a final look round before giving up the search.

Was there anywhere else likely?

Yes; there were the bags of mealies and the water-cask slung beneath the wain, both nearly full, the cask to give forth a sound when it was shaken, and the sacks ready to be emptied out upon a wagon sheet and shed their deep buff-coloured grains, hard, clean, and sweet, in a great heap, which was spread out more and more till they were about two deep, but showed not a sign of a smuggled stone.

"Fill the bags again, my lads," said the police superintendent, "and let's have a look at what's inside the wagon."

"We've searched everything there," said a sergeant gruffly.

"I have not," replied the superintendent sharply. "Let me see."

"But you haven't looked in the water-cask," said Anson mockingly; "turn the water out on to the wagon sheet. It won't stay there, of course; but we can easily get some more. Do you think diamonds would melt in water?"

"Try one and see," cried the superintendent angrily, as he turned away, to stand looking on while every article that could by any possibility have been made to act as a vehicle to hide smuggled diamonds had been examined and replaced.

“We’ve been sold, eh?” said the sergeant, looking up in his superintendent’s eyes at last.

“It seems like it,” was the reply. “There’s nothing here.”

Just then Anson, who had been lighting a fresh cigar, came up to him smilingly.

“Haven’t done, have you?” he said.

“Yes: quite,” was the gruff reply.

“Oh, I am sorry you haven’t had better luck,” said Anson, in a mock sympathetic tone. “It must be terribly disappointing, after expecting to make a big capture.”

“Very,” said the superintendent, looking the speaker searchingly in the eyes.

“Well, I said something to you before, but you took no notice.”

“Oh yes, I did.”

“But you didn’t act on my tip. It seems like playing the sneak, but that’s what they did to me, so I don’t mind paying them back in their own coin.”

“Pay whom?”

“The two who informed on me to save their own skins.”

“I do not understand you.”

“Oh dear, what fools you clever men are!”

“What do you mean?”

“Bah! And you call yourself a police officer. I’d make a better one out of a Dutch doll.”

“Once more, what do you mean?”

“Rub the dust out of your eyes, man.”

“There’s none there.”

“Tchah! Your eyes are full of the dust those two threw there. Can’t you see?”

“No.”

“Well, I am surprised at you,” cried Anson; “and after such a hint too! Can’t you see that they’ve been a-playing upon you—setting you off on a blind lead to keep your attention while they went off with a big parcel of diamonds?”

“What! West and Ingleborough?”

“To be sure! What should they want to volunteer for, and risk capture by the Boers, if they hadn’t something to gain by it?”

“Well, they had something to gain—honour and promotion.”

“Pish!” cried Anson; “they want something better than that! You’ve been had, squire. You’ve been set to catch poor innocent, lamb-like me, and all the while those two foxes have been stealing away with the plunder.”

“What!” cried the superintendent.

“I spoke plainly enough,” said Anson, smiling pleasantly.

“Yes, you spoke plainly enough,” said the superintendent; “but it’s nothing to laugh at, sir.”

“Why, it’s enough to make a cat laugh. Well, I wish you better luck,” said Anson, “and if you do catch up to Oliver West I hope you’ll slip the handcuffs on him at once and make him part with his smuggled swag.”

“You may trust me for that,” said the superintendent grimly.

“I shall,” said Anson, smiling broadly. “Glad you came after me, so that I could put you on the right track.”

“So am I,” said the police officer, with a peculiar look.

“And I’m sorry I cut up so rough,” continued Anson, smiling, as he apologised; “but you know, it isn’t nice to be stopped and overhauled as I have been.”

“Of course it isn’t,” said the officer drily; “but in my profession one can’t afford to study people’s feelings.”

“No, no, of course not. But don’t apologise.”

“I was not going to,” said the superintendent; “I’m sorry, though, to find out that West is such a scamp. Why, Ingleborough must be as bad.”

“Or worse,” said Anson, grinning.

“Yes, because he’s older. Why, I quite trusted that fellow.”

“Ah, you’re not the first man who has been deceived, sir.”

“Of course not; but by the way, Mr Anson, why didn’t you say something of this kind in your defence when Ingleborough charged you before the directors?”

“Why didn’t I say something about it? Why, because I didn’t know. It only came to me too late. But there, you know now; and, as I said before, I wish you luck and a good haul, only unfortunately they’ve got a good start and you’ll have your work cut out. Going? Goodbye then.”

“Goodbye?” said the superintendent, using the word as a question.

“Yes, of course. I’m going to chance it. I don’t suppose we shall meet any Boers.”

“No; I don’t think you’ll meet any Boers,” said the officer, in so meaning a way that Anson grew uneasy.

“Why do you speak like that?” he said sharply.

“Only that it isn’t goodbye, Mr Anson.”

“Not goodbye? Yes, it is. I’m off to the south at once.”

“No, sir; you’re going north with me. You area suspected person, Mr Anson. I am not altogether satisfied with my search, nor yet with your very ingenious story.”

“Then search again?” cried Anson excitedly.

“Not here, sir. I’ll have a careful look over the wagon when we get back to Kimberley.”

“You don’t mean to say you are going to drag me back to Kimberley?”

“I do, sir, and you ought to be thankful, for you’d never pass through the Boers’ lines further south.”

“But you have thoroughly searched me and my wagon.”

“I have told you that I am not satisfied,” said the officer coldly; “and, even if I were, I should take you back with me all the same.”

“Why? What for?”

“To face this Mr West and his companion if we capture them and bring them back.”

“But what’s that to me?”

“Only this: you are the informer, and will have to give evidence against them when they are examined. Now, please, no more words, Mr Anson; you are my prisoner. Quick, boys! Get the team in-spanned and the wagon turned the other way.”

“But breakfast,” said Anson, with a groan. “I must have something to eat.”

“The billy is boiling,” said the sergeant to his chief, in a confidential tone, “and the bullocks would be all the better for an hour’s feed, sir.”

The superintendent looked sharply towards the fire and the prisoner’s provisions, and shaded his eyes and gazed for some minutes south.

“You’re right,” he said. “Send two men off a good mile forward as outposts, and let the oxen feed.—Now, Mr Anson, I’ll take breakfast with you if you’ll have me for a guest.”

“Yes; I can’t help myself,” said the prisoner bitterly; “and suppose I shan’t have a chance given me to make your tea agreeable with something I have in the wagon.”

“No; I don’t think you will, sir, thanks.”

“But I can sit and wish you luck, my friend, and my wish is this—that a commando may swoop down upon you and your gang.”

“Thanks once more,” said the superintendent grimly. “There, sit down, sir, and I’ll preside and send you your breakfast.”

This was done, the repast made, and, as soon as two of the constables had finished, they were sent off to relieve their rear-guard, sending them on to have their meal, and with orders to fall back towards the wagon a quarter of an hour after the relief had been made.

All this was duly carried out, the oxen in-spanned, and the wagon began its lumbering course back towards Kimberley, the black driver and voorlooper taking their places in the most unconcerned way, as if it were all in the day’s work, while Anson, after eating voraciously, had a fit of the sulks, watching narrowly the movements of the police. After a moment’s indecision he climbed upon the box in the front of the wagon and in doing so glanced at his rifle, which hung in its slings close to his head.

“Six of them,” he said to himself, as he smiled pleasantly. “I could bring down the chief and one more easily; but that wouldn’t scare the rest away. Odds are too heavy, and one don’t want to be taken and hanged. They are so particular about a policeman being hurt! Never mind; I daresay my luck will turn—fool as I was to try that dodge on about those two going off with the smuggled loot. I’ll wait. Here goes to whistle for the Boers, as the sailors do for wind.”

Saying this, he drew out the little mahogany case which held his flute, and coolly took the pieces and fitted them together, before crossing his legs upon the rough seat and beginning to blow, keeping up a series of

the most doleful old Scotch and Irish laments, while the oxen plodded on and the police rode by the wagon side, listening and looking in vain for any sign tending to point out the fact that the flautist was a dishonest dealer in the coveted crystals which were so hard to get, but all the same keeping a keen look-out for danger in the shape of advancing Boers.

Chapter Twelve.

In the Thick of it.

The report of the rifle was magical in its effect upon the Basuto ponies, each rearing up on its hind legs and striking out with its forefeet; but the same punishment was meted out by the riders—namely, a sharp tap between the ears with the barrels of the rifles—and the result was that beyond fidgeting they stood fairly still, while *flash, flash, flash*, three more shots were fired. The bullets whizzed by with their peculiar noise, sounding quite close, but probably nowhere near the riders—those who fired judging in the darkness quite by sound.

“Let’s keep on at a walk,” whispered West; but, low as his utterance was, the sound reached an enemy’s ears.

“Mind what you’re about!” said someone close at hand, evidently mistaking the speaker for a friend; “one of those bullets went pretty close to my ear. Whereabouts are they?”

“Away to the right,” whispered Ingleborough, in Dutch.

“Come on then,” said the former speaker. “*Ck*!”

The pony the man rode made a plunge as if spurs had been suddenly dug into its sides, and the dull beat of its hoofs on the dusty soil told of the course its rider was taking.

West was about to speak when the rapid beating of hoofs came from his left, and he had hard work to restrain his own mount from joining a party of at least a dozen of the enemy as they swept by noisily in the darkness.

“What do the fools think they are going to do by galloping about like that?” said Ingleborough gruffly.

“If they had kept still they might have caught us. Hallo! Firing again!”

Three or four shots rang out on the night air, and away in front of the pair the beating of hoofs was heard again.

“Why, the country seems alive with them,” whispered West. “Hadn’t we better keep on?”

“Yes, we must chance it,” was the reply. “No one can see us twenty yards away.”

“And we ought to make the most of the darkness.”

“Hist!” whispered Ingleborough, and his companion sat fast, listening to the movements of a mounted man who was evidently proceeding cautiously across their front from left to right. Then the dull sound of hoofs ceased—went on again—ceased once more for a time, so long that West felt that their inimical neighbour must have stolen away, leaving the coast quite clear.

He was about to say so to Ingleborough, but fortunately waited a little longer, and then started, for there was the impatient stamp of a horse, followed by a sound that suggested the angry jerking of a rein, for the animal plunged and was checked again.

As far as the listeners could make out, a mounted man was not forty yards away, and the perspiration stood out in great drops upon West’s brow as he waited for the discovery which he felt must be made. For a movement on the part of either of the ponies, or a check of the rein to keep them from stretching down their necks to graze, would have been enough. But they remained abnormally still, and at last, to the satisfaction and relief of both, the Boer vedette moved off at a trot, leaving the pair of listeners once more free to breathe.

“That was a narrow escape!” said West, as soon as their late companion was fairly out of hearing.

“Yes. I suppose we ought to have dismounted and crawled up to him and put a bullet through his body,” answered Ingleborough.

“Ugh! Don’t talk about it!” replied West. “I suppose we shall have plenty of such escapes as this before we have done.”

“You’re right! But we can move on now, and—Hist! There are some more on the left.”

“I don’t hear anyone. Yes, I do. Sit fast; there’s a strong party coming along.”

West was quite right, a body of what might have been a hundred going by them at a walk some eighty or ninety yards away, and at intervals a short sharp order was given in Boer-Dutch which suggested to West commands in connection with his own drill, “Right incline!” or “Left incline!” till the commando seemed to have passed right away out of hearing.

“Now then,” said West softly, “let’s get on while we have the chance.”

The words were hardly above his breath, but in the utter stillness of the night on the veldt they penetrated sufficiently far, and in an instant both the despatch-riders knew what the brief orders they had heard meant, namely that as the commando rode along a trooper was ordered to rein up at about every hundred yards and was left as a vedette.

For no sooner had West spoken than there was a sharp challenge to left and right, running away along a line, and directly after the reports of rifles rang out and bullets whizzed like insects through the dark night air. Many flew around and over the heads of the fugitives; for the moment the discovery was made West and Ingleborough pressed their ponies’ sides and went forward at full gallop to pass through the fire in front of them.

It was close work, for guided by the sounds of the ponies’ hoofs, the Boers kept on firing, one shot being from close at hand—so close that the flash seemed blinding, the report tremendous. This was followed by a sharp shock, the two companions, as they tore on, cannoning against the vedette, West’s pony striking the horse in his front full upon the shoulder and driving the poor beast right in the way of Ingleborough’s, with the

consequence that there was a second collision which sent the Boer and his horse prostrate, Ingleborough's pony making a bound which cleared the struggling pair, and then racing forward alongside of its stable companion, when they galloped on shoulder to shoulder. They were followed by a scattered fire of bullets, and when these ceased West turned in his saddle and listened, to hear the heavy beat of many hoofs, telling of pursuit; but the despatch-riders were well through the line, and galloped on at full speed for the next half-hour, when they slackened down and gradually drew rein and listened.

"Can't hear a sound!" said West.

"Nor I," replied Ingleborough, after a pause. "So now let's breathe our nags and go steadily, for we may very likely come upon another of these lines of mounted men."

A short consultation was then held respecting the line of route to be followed as likely to be the most clear of the enemy.

"I've been thinking," said Ingleborough, "that our best way will be to strike off west, and after we are over the river to make a good long détour."

West said nothing, but rode on by his companion's side, letting his pony have a loose rein so that the sure-footed little beast could pick its way and avoid stones.

"I think that will be the best plan," said Ingleborough, after a long pause.

Still West was silent.

"What is it?" said his companion impatiently.

"I was thinking," was the reply.

"Well, you might say something," continued Ingleborough, in an ill-used tone. "It would be more lively if you only gave a grunt."

"Humph!"

It was as near an imitation as the utterer could give, and Ingleborough

laughed.

“Thanks,” he said. “That’s a little more cheering. I’ve been thinking, too, that if we make this détour to the west we shall get into some rougher country, where we can lie up among the rocks of some kopje when it gets broad daylight.”

“And not go on during the day?”

“Certainly not; for two reasons: our horses could not keep on without rest, and we should certainly be seen by the Boers who are crowding over the Vaal.” West was silent again.

“Hang it all!” cried Ingleborough. “Not so much as a grunt now! Look here, can you propose a better plan?”

“I don’t know about better, but I was thinking quite differently from you.”

“Let’s have your way then.”

“Perhaps you had better not. You have had some experience in your rides out on excursions with Mr Norton, and I daresay your plan is a better one than mine.”

“I don’t know,” said Ingleborough shortly. “Let’s hear yours.”

“But—”

“Let’s—hear—yours,” cried the other imperatively, and his voice sounded so harsh that West felt annoyed, and he began:

“Well, I thought of doing what you propose at first.”

“Naturally: it seems the likeliest way.”

“But after turning it over in my mind it seemed to me that the Boers would all be hurrying across the border and scouring our country, looking in all directions as they descended towards Kimberley.”

“Yes, that’s right enough. But go on; don’t hesitate. It’s your expedition,

and I’m only second.”

“So I thought that we should have a far better chance and be less likely to meet with interruption if we kept on the east side of the Vaal till it turned eastward, and then, if we could get across, go on north through the enemy’s country.”

“Invade the Transvaal with an army consisting of one officer and one man?”

“There!” cried West pettishly. “I felt sure that you would ridicule my plans.”

“Then you were all wrong, lad,” cried Ingleborough warmly, “for, so far from ridiculing your plans, I think them capital. There’s success in them from the very cheek of the idea—I beg your pardon: I ought to say audacity. Why, of course, if we can only keep clear of the wandering commandos—and I think we can if we travel only by night—we shall find that nearly everyone is over the border on the way to the siege of Kimberley, and when we stop at a farm, as we shall be obliged to for provisions, we shall only find women and children.”

“But they’ll give warning of our having been there on our way to Mafeking.”

“No, they will not. How will they know that we are going to Mafeking if we don’t tell them? I’m afraid we must make up a tale. Perhaps you’ll be best at that. I’m not clever at fibbing.”

“I don’t see that we need tell the people lies,” said West shortly.

“Then we will not,” said his companion. “Perhaps we shall not be asked; but if we are I shall say that we are going right away from the fighting because we neither of us want to kill any Boers.”

“Humph!” grunted West.

“What, doesn’t that suit you? It’s true enough. I don’t want to kill any Boers, and I’m sure you don’t. Why, when you come to think that we shall be telling this to women whose husbands, sons, or brothers have been commandoed, we are sure to be treated as friends.”

“We had better act on your plan,” said West, “and then we need make up no tales.”

“Wait a minute,” said Ingleborough. “Pull up.”

West obeyed, and their ponies began to nibble the herbage.

“Now listen: can you hear anything?”

West was silent for nearly a minute, passed in straining his ears to catch the slightest sound.

“Nothing,” he said at last.

“Nothing,” said his companion. “Let’s jump down!”

West followed his companion’s example, and swung himself out of the saddle.

“Now get between the nags’ heads and hold them still. You and they will form three sides of a square: I’m going to be the fourth.”

“What for?”

“To light a match.”

“Oh, don’t stop to smoke now,” said West reproachfully. “Let’s get on.”

“Who’s going to smoke, old Jump-at-conclusions? I’m going to carry out our plan.”

Scratch! and a match blazed up, revealing Ingleborough’s face as he bent down over it to examine something bright held in one hand—something he tried to keep steady till the match burned close to his fingers and was crushed out.

“Horses’ heads are now pointing due north,” he said. “Keep where you are till I’m mounted. That’s right! Now then, up you get! That’s right! Now then! Right face—forward!”

“But you’re going east.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, with a little laugh, “and I’m going with West or by West all the same. We must keep on till we get to the railway, cross it, and then get over the border as soon as we can.”

“What, follow out my plan?”

“Of course! It’s ten times better than mine. Look here, my dear boy, you are a deal too modest. Recollect that you are in command, and that my duty is to obey.”

“Nonsense!”

“Sense, sir; sound sense. I’ve got enough in my head to know when a thing’s good, and you may depend upon my opposing you if I feel that you are going to act foolishly. Once for all, your idea’s capital, lad; so let’s get on as fast as we can till daybreak, and then we can lie up in safely in the enemy’s country.”

In due course the railway was reached, a breeze springing up and sweeping the sky clear so that they had a better chance of avoiding obstacles in the way, and as soon as they were well over the line the ponies were kept at a canter, which was only checked here and there over broken ground. This, however, became more plentiful as the night glided away, but the rough land and low kopjes were the only difficulties that they encountered on the enemy’s side of the border, where they passed a farm or two, rousing barking dogs, which kept on baying till the fugitives were out of hearing.

At last the pale streak right in front warned them that daylight was coming on fast, and they searched the country as they cantered on till away more to the north a rugged eminence clearly seen against the sky suggested itself as the sort of spot they required, and they now hurried their ponies on till they came to a rushing, bubbling stream running in the right direction.

“Our guide, Noll,” said Ingleborough quietly; “that will lead us right up to the kopje, where we shall find a resting-place, a good spot for hiding, and plenty of water as well.”

All proved as Ingleborough had so lightly stated; but before they reached

the shelter amongst the piled-up masses of granite and ironstone, with shady trees growing in the cracks and crevices, their glasses showed them quite half-a-dozen farms dotted about the plain. They were in great doubt as to whether they were unseen when they had to dismount and lead their willing steeds into a snug little amphitheatre surrounded by rocks and trees, while the hollow itself was rich with pasturage such as the horses loved best, growing upon both sides of the clear stream whose sources were high up among the rocks.

“You see to hobbling the ponies, Noll,” said Ingleborough, “while I get up as high as I can with my glass and give an eye to the farms. If we’ve been seen someone will soon be after us. We can’t rest till we know. But eat your breakfast, and I’ll nibble mine while I watch. Don’t take off the saddles and bridles.”

West did as he was requested, and ate sparingly while he watched the horses browsing for quite an hour, before Ingleborough came down from the highest part of the kopje.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Let’s have off the saddles and bridles now. Have you hobbled them well?”

“Look,” said West.

“Capital. I didn’t doubt you; but you might have made a mistake, and if we dropped asleep and woke up to find that the ponies were gone it would be fatal to your despatch.”

“Yes; but one of us must keep watch while the other sleeps.”

“It’s of no use to try, my lad. It isn’t to be done. If we’re going to get into Mafeking in a business-like condition we must have food and rest. Come, the horses will not straggle away from this beautiful moist grass, so let’s lie down in this shady cave with its soft sandy bottom and sleep hard till sunset. Then we must be up and away again.”

“But anxiety won’t let me sleep,” said West. “I’ll sit down and watch till you wake, and then I’ll have a short sleep while you take my place.”

“Very well,” said Ingleborough, smiling.

“What are you laughing at?” said West, frowning.

“I was only thinking that you had a very hard day yesterday and that you have had an arduous time riding through the night.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, nature is nature! Try and keep awake if you can! I’m going to lie flat on my back and sleep. You’ll follow my example in less than an hour.”

“I—will—not!” said West emphatically.

But he did, as he sat back resting his shoulders against the rock and gazing out from the mouth of the cave where they had made themselves comfortable at the beautiful sunlit veldt, till it all grew dark as if a veil had been drawn over his eyes.

It was only the lids which had closed, and then, perfectly unconscious, he sank over sidewise till he lay prone on the soft sand, sleeping heavily, till a hand was laid upon his shoulder and he started into wakefulness, to see that the sun had set, that the shadows were gathering over the veldt, and then that Ingleborough was smiling in his face.

“Rested, old man?” he said. “That’s right. The nags have had a splendid feed, and they are ready for their night’s work. I haven’t seen a soul stirring. Come on! Let’s have a good drink of water and a feed, and by that time we ought to be ready to start.”

“We ought to cross the Vaal before morning,” said West.

“I doubt it,” was the reply, “for it will be rather a job, as we shall find the enemy about there. If we get across to-morrow night we shall have done well.”

“But we shall never get to Mafeking like this.”

“It’s going to be a harder task than you thought for when you volunteered so lightly, my dear boy; but we’ve undertaken to do it, and do it we will. It isn’t a work of hours nor days. It may take us weeks. Come along! I’m hungry, and so are you.”

“But tell me,” said West, “how long have you been awake?”

“Not above a quarter of an hour. We must have sleep and rest as well as food. When we’ve had the last we shall be ready for anything through the night.”

And so it proved as they rode on properly refreshed, meeting with no adventure, but being startled by the barking roars of lions twice during the night, which came to an end as they reached a very similar kopje offering just such accommodation as they had met with on the previous morning.

“Hah!” said Ingleborough. “Just enough prog left for a rough breakfast. To-morrow we shall have to begin travelling by day, so as to pay a visit to some farm, for we can’t do as the nags do, eat grass when they can get it and nibble green shoots when they can’t. Now then, my dear Noll, the orders for to-day are: sleep beneath this projecting shelf.”

“But I say,” said West, a minute or so later, “is your rifle charged? You were wiping the barrels as we rode along.”

There was no reply, for Ingleborough was fast asleep, and West soon followed his example.

Chapter Thirteen.

After a Lapse.

Oliver West was sleeping soundly that night from sheer fatigue; but all the same his slumber was not pleasant, for though his body was resting his brain was hard at work.

Before an hour had passed he was conscious of being cold, and in a dreamy way he felt that he ought to do what under the circumstances was impossible: that is to say, put more clothes over him, or, failing them, as he had no more, roll himself over and over in the blanket that he had brought strapped to his saddle-bow and only thrown over him when he lay down to sleep. But his body was so steeped in sleep that he did not stir, and suffered from the freezing air of the night—so tremendous a

change from the torrid heat of mid-day out on the veldt.

Later on, about midnight, the impression came upon him that he could hear a lion far away, seeming to make the earth quiver beneath him by giving forth in the fierce beast's strangely ventriloquial way its awe-inspiring roar, so puzzling to the listener as to whether it is far off or near. And even in his dreamy state West found himself doubting that it could be a lion's roar that he heard so near to where civilisation had driven off most of the savage beasts of the plain. But the roar came again, nearer, and in his dreams he felt sure that he was right, and he recalled, still sleeping, the fact that now and then the king of beasts followed one or other of the straggling herds of antelopes quite close to the Boers' farms. Then the curious barking roar ceased, and with it consciousness for some time.

All at once he found himself wide awake, lying upon his back, and gazing straight up through the transparent darkness at the stars. He lay for some moments wondering what had awakened him, perfectly still, and listening intently for steps or the trampling of horses, feeling sure that the Boers were close at hand.

Instinctively his hand was reached out to grasp the rifle, which he had laid by his side and covered from the dew or hoar frost, whichever might come, by throwing over it part of his blanket.

As he touched it the cold perspiration began to start from every pore, for there was a whiff of hot breath upon his face, and he could dimly see that some large animal was stretching down its muzzle towards him, and for a few brief moments he lay as if paralysed, expecting to feel himself seized and dragged away, for now came back with keen clearness the recollection of having heard the distant roaring of a lion.

He had hardly grasped this when once more, from somewhere near, the lion's terrifying cry arose, evidently, as he thought in a flash, one of the companions of the huge beast at his side. In an instant now he had grasped the truth, for as the distant lion roared there came from his right the peculiar stumbling movement of one of the hobbled horses striving to get closer to where there would be human companionship, if not protection. "Poor beast!" thought West, as his fascinated eyes stared at

the dim shape above him, so close that it shut out from him the light of the stars.

Then the half-paralysed listener saw clearly, for the beast raised its head and uttered a low whinnying cry, which was answered from the direction where the other hobbled pony was moving.

“Woho, my boy!” whispered West, with the blood now tingling through his veins, and as the pony whinnied softly again West raised himself up with his rifle in his right hand and stretched out his left for it to come in contact with the soft warm muzzle of his pony, which pressed against it, the poor brute uttering a low sigh. Quite a minute then passed, the two ponies remaining motionless, and West listening with every nerve on the strain, knowing as he did that a lion must be in very close proximity, and fully expecting every moment that there might be a tremendous bound and the savage brute would alight either upon him or upon one of the poor shivering beasts.

Then, from evidently pretty close at hand, there was a low muttering growl, the barrel of West’s rifle fell into his left hand as he held the weapon pistol-wise and fired low down in the direction of the sounds.

At the flash and in company with the report there was a yelping snarl and a couple of angry roars in quick succession.

West fired again as nearly as he could judge where the beast would be, and the next moment Ingleborough was kneeling by his side.

“What is it—lions?” he panted.

“Yes,” whispered West, whose fingers were busy re-loading, and he listened for the next sound, but only to hear a deep sighing breath on either side, telling that the horses had been too much terrified to start away, or else felt that they would be safer with their masters, and that to try to gallop off meant the springing of a savage enemy upon their backs.

The silence continued for nearly a minute, and then there was a vicious snarling, apparently some fifty yards away, while without a moment’s hesitation Ingleborough raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired as nearly as he could judge at the spot from whence the noise came. He fired

twice, the shots being so close together as almost to be like one for a while. Then after a perceptible interval they were echoed from the walls of a distant kopje, and again from another, before they died away.

“That has startled the lions,” said Ingleborough; “but I’m afraid it will startle the Boers and bring them to see what’s the matter.”

“Yes, the lions are gone,” said West. “Hark at that! Who says horses have no sense?”

For the *crop, crop, crop* of the browsing animals had begun again from close at hand, and the comrades stood listening for some little time while the otherwise unbroken stillness once more reigned.

“What’s to be done?” said West. “Shall we make a start at once, or wait for daylight?”

“I was thinking,” replied Ingleborough. “If we start now we have the advantage of the darkness to hide us, but the disadvantage too, for we may go blundering right into the midst of some commando. I don’t think the firing could do us any harm, after all, for the enemy would not be able to tell where the sounds came from. I think we had better stay where we are and wait for morning.”

“I think so too,” said West, with a sigh of relief; “but one of us ought to watch in case the lions come back.”

“They will not come back!” said Ingleborough decisively. “From what I know of their habits they’ll have been too much scared to risk their lives again. You hit one of them; there’s no doubt about that.”

“You think there was more than one?”

“I should say it was a family party of an old lioness and two or three half-grown cubs.”

“Then we may lie down and sleep again?”

“Yes; we must trust to our luck, Noll; there’s a good deal of chance in these affairs.”

West hesitated for a few minutes, and then followed his companion's example, lying awake for some time thinking of what a strange change this was from his quiet life in the offices of the company; and then, as he began to ponder over what might be to come, the subject grew too difficult for him and he fell fast asleep.

But he was the first to awaken in the grey dawn, to find that the horses were close at hand, browsing away contentedly enough, and ready to neigh softly and submit to his caress when he walked up to them; while, as soon as he had satisfied himself that they had not suffered in any way, he walked in the direction in which he had fired during the night, to find footprints in several directions, and in one place the dust among some stones torn up and scattered, as if one of the brutes had fallen on its side and scratched up the earth. Plainer still in the way of proof of what had happened, there were spots and smudges of blood, giving thorough evidence that one of the lions had been wounded by the chance shot, and had fallen, and struggled fiercely to regain its feet.

He had just arrived at this conclusion when Ingleborough found him.

"Hallo!" cried his companion; "that was a good blind shot, Noll. Well done, lad! A full-grown lion too! Look at its pads. It must have had a nasty flesh-wound to have bled like this."

"Do you think it'll be lying anywhere near, half-dead, or quite?"

"No! A cat has nine lives, they say; and really this kind of beast is very, hard to kill. Look, there are the pugs, along with those of three more, all half-grown, going right away yonder into the open veldt. We might hunt 'em down, but we don't want to, eh?"

"Absurd! We want to get on at once. Can you see any pug, as you call it, of Boers?"

"No. I've had a good look round, and as soon as we've had a mouthful we'll be off. I say, it's wonderful, isn't it, how one can sleep out here on the veldt?"

"Surrounded by dangers!" replied West. Then laconically: "Yes."

Their scanty meal was soon eaten and washed down with a draught of pure water, after which they both climbed to the top of the highest part of the kopje to take a good survey of the surrounding plain.

“There’s nothing in sight,” said Ingleborough quietly; “so we’ll hurry on at once while our shoes are good.”

The ponies looked as fresh as ever when they were saddled and ready to start, and after an examination of the compass Ingleborough pointed out that they ought to keep along north-east to strike the Vaal somewhere that evening, and then go along its southern bank till a ford was reached, after which their journey would be north by west.

“But we must be on the look-out for some lonely farm to-day,” said West. “We ought to well fill our haversacks before we start again.”

“Never fear; we shall find plenty of food for sale so long as we have money to show the Boer ladies. Ready?”

“Yes,” replied West, and together they sprang into their saddles and rode down the slope, their horses carefully picking their way among the stones, till the open veldt was reached. They then struck off at a quiet canter towards a rocky ridge so as to put that between them and the kopje where they had slept, in case by any possibility their shots had been heard and a party of the enemy should ride up to it to make a search and in the course of it see them in the distance riding away.

“And that would mean pursuit, a race, and the fastest horses to win,” said West.

“As they generally do when there is fair play,” replied Ingleborough quietly. “Keep a sharp look-out forward, and I’ll keep on casting an eye back at the kopje.”

The ridge was only about a couple of miles distant from their previous night’s resting-place, proving to be fairly high, but with a gradual slope: while just as they reached the spot where the ascent began Ingleborough turned in his saddle from a long look-out backwards.

“This is like wringing one’s own neck,” he cried. “Now then, let’s canter up

this bit, and as soon as we have topped it we need not be so cautious. Ready?”

“Yes,” cried West.

“Then off! Steady! No galloping; a gentle canter.”

It was fortunate for the pair that they did not breathe their horses, but rode up the gentle slope at a regular lady’s canter, to find the ridge pleasantly fringed with a patch of open woodland, through which their steeds easily picked their way, and on to the farther slope, which was more dotted with forest growth; but there was nothing to hinder their rate of speed—in fact, the horses began to increase the pace as a broad grassy stretch opened before them.

The moment they passed out of the woodland on to the open space West uttered a word of warning and pressed his pony’s side, for the first glance showed him that they had come right upon a Boer laager which was in the course of being broken up. Oxen were being in-spanned, men were tightening the girths of their ponies, and preparations were in progress everywhere for an advance in some direction.

Chapter Fourteen.

Man-hunting.

Whatsoever this may have been, the sudden appearance of the two fresh horsemen decided the course of some thirty or forty, who stood about for a few moments staring wonderingly at the pair flying down the descent, before mounting in some cases, in others seizing their rifles and flinging themselves upon the ground to load rapidly and take aim.

“Mind how you go, Noll!” shouted Ingleborough. “A fall means being taken prisoner now!”

He had hardly shouted the words before the bullets came buzzing about their ears like bees after disturbers on a hot swarming day in old England.

“Take care!” cried West excitedly. “It will be a long chase; so don’t press your nag too hard. Lie down on your horse’s neck; the bullets are coming more and more, and we shan’t be safe for another mile.”

“Bah! It’s all nonsense about their marksmanship,” cried Ingleborough, who seemed to be suffering from a peculiar kind of elation in which there was no feeling of fear. “Let them shoot! We’re end on to them, and have a clear course! They’re trained to shoot springbok, I suppose, when they get a chance; but they haven’t had much experience of galloping men. Fire away, you cowardly brutes!” he roared, as if he fancied that the enemy could hear him. “I don’t believe you could hit a runaway railway truck or a cantering furniture-van, let alone a horse with a man on its back.”

“Ah!” cried West, at that moment, as he turned from looking back and snatched off his broad-brimmed hat.

“Noll, boy, don’t say you’re hit!” cried Ingleborough passionately.

“No,” said West, drawing his breath with a peculiar sound. “I’ve escaped; but I thought I’d got it! I felt as if my hat was being snatched off, and

something touched my ear."

"Turn your head this way!" said Ingleborough huskily.

"Wait a moment!" replied West, who had passed his hat into his rein hand, to afterwards clap his right to his head and draw it away.

"First blood to them!" he said, with a mocking laugh.

"Here, we must ease up and let me bandage it," said Ingleborough.

"No, thanks: that's a likely tale with the bullets flying like this! Keep on, man; we've got a fair start! Let's get past those trees forward yonder; they'll shelter us a bit!"

"But your wound, my lad?"

"They've only nicked the edge of my ear. It will stop bleeding of itself. There's nothing to mind!"

Ingleborough watched him eagerly as he spoke, and seeing for himself that there was only a feeble trickle of blood from the cut ear, he pressed on in the required direction.

"Give me warning," he cried, "if you feel faint, and we'll pull up, dismount, and cover ourselves with our horses while we try what practice we can make if they come on."

"*If* they come on!" said West bitterly. "Look for yourself; they're already coming!"

Ingleborough turned his head sharply, to see that a line of galloping men had just been launched from the Boer laager to the right and left, and were streaming in single file down the slope, leaving ample room between them for their dismounted companions to keep up a steady fire upon the fugitives.

"That's their game, is it?" said Ingleborough, between his teeth. "Very well, then, we must make a race of it and see what our picked ponies can do."

“That’s right!” cried West. “Let’s open out a little!”

“Right, and give them less to aim at! The bullets are flying wildly now. Ten yards apart will do.”

They separated to about this distance, and at a word from West each nipped his pony’s flanks with his knees and rose a little in the stirrups, with the result that the wiry little animals stretched out greyhound fashion and flew over the veldt as if thoroughly enjoying the gallop.

“Steady! steady!” shouted West, at the end of ten minutes. “We’re leaving the brutes well behind, and the bullets are getting scarce. Don’t let’s worry the brave little nags! With a start like this we can leave the Boers well behind.”

Ingleborough nodded after a glance backward and followed his companion’s example, drawing rein so that their steeds settled down into a hand-gallop, still leaving their pursuers farther behind. The ground was now perfectly level, stretching for three or four miles without an obstacle, and then the horizon line was broken by one of the many kopjes of the country, one which lay right in their line of flight.

“What about that?” said West. “Shall we make for it and get into shelter ready for using our rifles?”

“I don’t like it!” replied Ingleborough. “There might be another party there, and then it would be like galloping into another hornets’ nest.”

“I don’t like it either,” said West; “but we must think of our horses, and by the time we get there half of this pursuing lot will have tailed off, while I don’t believe the rest will come on if we shoot pretty true from behind some rock.”

“That’s right!” said Ingleborough. “We mustn’t let them keep us on the run, for the horses’ sake.”

“Look out!” said West, in warning tones.

“What is it?”

“They’re pulling up and dismounting,” replied West. “Here come the bullets again.”

For as he spoke the buzzing, whizzing notes of danger overhead, which had for some minutes ceased, began to utter their warnings again, but in a very irregular way, which brought forth the remark from Ingleborough that their enemies’ hands were unsteady from their sharp ride.

“The more need then for us to get into a sheltered place where we can rest a few minutes before they can come up,” said West. “Let’s have another sharp gallop and get well among the rocks: it will be riding out of range and getting more in advance before they mount again.”

“Right, general!” cried Ingleborough banteringly; and once more they tore over the veldt, pursued only by the bullets, for the following Boers had dismounted to a man.

“Keep a little wider,” said West, laughing outright at his companion’s word “general.”

“Don’t let’s give them a chance by riding so close together!”

“Right! Fine manoeuvre!” replied Ingleborough; and they went on towards the kopje at full speed, both feeling a wild kind of exhilaration as the wind rushed by their cheeks, and the plucky little horses stretched out more and more as if enjoying the race as much as their riders.

Strange terms “exhilaration” and “enjoying,” but none the less true. For there was no feeling of dread, even though the bullets kept on whizzing by them to right, to left, in front, far behind; now high overhead, and more often striking up the dust and ricochetting into space, to fall neither knew where. Every leaden messenger, it it reached its mark, meant a wound; many would have resulted in death had they struck the fugitives. But the excitement made the rush one wild gratification, combined with a kind of certainty that they would escape scot-free; and they laughed aloud, shouting words of encouragement to their ponies and cries of defiance and derision at the unsuccessful riflemen.

“Why, we could do better ourselves, Noll!” cried Ingleborough. “So these are your puffed-up Boers whom writers have put in their books and

praised so effusively! My word, what a lot of gammon has been written about rifle-shooting! I believe that Cooper's Deerslayer with his old-fashioned rifle was a duffer after all, and the wonderful shots of the trappers all bluff."

"Perhaps so!" shouted West, rather breathlessly; "but these fellows can shoot!"

"Not a bit!"

"Well, my ear has stopped bleeding; but it smarts as if someone was trying to saw into the edge."

"Never mind; it's only gristle!" said Ingleborough.

"I don't mind, but if the Boer who fired that bullet had only held his rifle a hair's breadth more to the left the scrap of lead would have gone into my skull."

"Of course; but then he did not hold his rifle a hair's breadth more to the left. By jingo!"

"What's the matter?"

"Don't quite know yet. It feels quite numb and free from pain. I don't think I'm hit. I half fancy the poor pony has it, for he gave a tremendous start. All right; keep on! The bullet struck my rolled-up blanket, and it has gone into the saddle. I can feel the little hole."

"What a narrow escape!" cried West anxiously. "Come, you must own that they can shoot straight! If that bullet had gone a trifle higher it would have gone through your loins."

"To be sure! and a little higher still, through between my shoulders; a trifle more, through the back of my head; and again a trifle more, and it would have gone above me. As it is, there's a hole in my saddle, and I'm all right."

"Thank Heaven!" cried West.

“I did,” said Ingleborough, “but in a quiet way! Yes, lad, they can shoot; but it’s a hard mark to hit—a galloping man end on. They’d be better if we were going at right angles to the shot!”

“Now then, another five minutes, and we shall be beyond the range of their rifles.”

“And in another you had better give the word to slacken speed, for the ground will be getting rough. Why not give it now? They’ve ceased firing.”

“Ease down then to a gentle canter,” cried West, in reply, and their panting steeds were checked so that for the last mile of their retreat they progressed at an easy ambling pace which enabled the horses to recover their wind, while the precipitous sides of the eminence in front grew clearer to the eye and gave ample proof of being able to furnish nooks which would afford them and their horses security, while enabling the friends a good opportunity for returning the compliment to the Boers as far as bullets were concerned.

West said something to this effect after taking his glass from where it was slung and looking back, to see that the enemy was remounting and continuing the pursuit.

“Not they!” replied Ingleborough. “They’re too fond of whole skins to run risks! They’ll lie down in holes and corners to fire at us, but they will not attack us if we are well in cover, and they find we can hold our rifles straight.”

“Then we must!” said West quietly. “Only we shall want a bit of rest first, for my nerves are all of a quiver, and the blood feels as if it was jumping in my veins.”

“Come along then! We’ll soon find a place where we can lie down behind the stones! The sooner the better too, for I’m beginning to feel rather murderous.”

“Murderous!” cried West.

“Yes: don’t you? I’m not going to be shot at for nothing! Look here, Nolly, my lad, life’s very sweet, and I value mine. I’m peaceably disposed

enough, but these brutes have invaded our country, and you've had proof that they are trying their level best to make us food for the crows. Under the circumstances don't you think it's time for the lambs—meaning us—to turn upon the butchers—meaning the Boers—and let *them* feed the crows instead?"

"Don't talk in poetical metaphors, Ingle," said West, with a grim smile. "If it comes to the point, we'll make our rifles speak in a way that will keep the enemy from stopping to hear the end of what they have to say."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Ingleborough; "who's talking metaphorically now?"

"I've done," said West. "Walk!" he cried loudly, and they drew rein, to let the ponies pick their way up the commencement of a slope dotted with small stones, while but a short distance farther on the front of the castle-like kopje was gashed with little gorges and ravines, offering plenty of places where horses and men might hide.

"Rather awkward if we were to find that there were some more of the enemy here!" said West, as the nature of the ground forced him to follow his companion, instead of their riding abreast.

He had hardly spoken when it was as if a trumpet had rung out a challenge from one of the little gorges in front, and West answered by shouting: "Right-about face!" and leading the way back. It was no trumpet, but the loud neigh of a Boer horse, while shot after shot was fired as they galloped away, fortunately being able to shelter themselves from the fire by striking off to the right as soon as they were clear of the stones, the higher ones proving their salvation, being in the way of the enemy's aim.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire!" cried Ingleborough; "and the fire's going to be hotter than the pan."

"Yes," cried West. "Give them their head! Gallop right for the river now."

Chapter Fifteen.

A Despatch-rider's Work.

"Hurrah!" cried West, as soon as they were once more well out in the open, their horses breathed, and ready to answer to any demand made upon them by their riders. "Keep abreast, and open out more. Faster! faster! We have only a short start this time."

"But we'll make the best of it," cried Ingleborough, between his teeth. "Bend down well! The firing has begun!"

"It is speaking for itself," said West grimly, as the buzzing whirr of the bullets began again, while faintly heard there came, half smothered by the thudding of their own horses' hoofs, the clattering of Boer mounts being led out over the stones of the ravine in which they had been hid.

"See any more of the old party?" cried West, as they rode well out now on to the level.

"No; we've turned off so much that they are quite in our rear."

"Then the way's clear for the river?"

"If we can reach it, lad," said Ingleborough; "and if we do it may be in flood, or impassable where we hit it."

"Or a hundred other things," cried West angrily, as they tore along at full gallop now, with the bullets flying round them.

"Don't begin to prophesy evil! I say we're going to leave the Boers far behind and escape."

"I can't look at our chance in the same flowery light as you do, my boy," replied Ingleborough. "My breakfast wasn't good enough to inspire me with so much hope, and I should advise you to open your haversack."

"Nonsense! I could not eat now!"

"But you must be ready to if you don't begin, my lad. My advice is that you get ready to eat those sandwiches, for you mustn't let the good verbal meat inside get into the enemy's hands."

Ingleborough had hardly spoken before his horse suddenly checked, throwing him forward upon its neck and nearly sending him off. But he clung to it desperately, while the poor beast's next act was to rear up, pawing hard at the air. In spite of the difficulty, Ingleborough shuffled himself back into the saddle, speaking encouraging words to the shivering animal, which kept on pawing at the air for a few moments and just gave its rider time to throw himself off sidewise before it went right over backwards, struck out with all four legs in the air, and then subsided —motionless.

West drew rein instantly as he tore by, and cantered back, reckless of the whistling bullets which were flying around.

"Beg their pardon!" cried Ingleborough, struggling to his feet after a heavy fall. "I retract my words."

"Hurt?" cried West excitedly.

"Rather! Ground is pretty hard!"

"Here," cried West, leaping off; "jump into my saddle, and I'll hold on by the mane and run."

"Nonsense! Absurd! Don't be a fool!" cried Ingleborough angrily. "The game's up for me! Jump up and gallop again! Don't let the brutes take you too."

"Likely!" said West, taking out his handkerchief and beginning to fold it bandage fashion. "Your head's bleeding. Let me tie this round."

"Let it bleed!" cried Ingleborough angrily, and picking up his soft felt hat, which had fallen in the dust, he stuck it on tightly. "That's bandaged!" he said. "Now then, be off before it's too late."

"Of course; that's just what you would have done!" said West quietly.

"Never mind what I would have done," cried Ingleborough angrily. "Ride for your life!"

"Do you take me for a Dutchman?" said West coolly.

“Oh, you fool—you fool!” cried Ingleborough, stamping his foot angrily. “You’ll be too late! No, they’re dismounting. Now then, up with you and make a dash.”

West gave a glance to right and left, to see that some twenty of the enemy had leaped from their horses and were advancing, while twice as many more, who covered them with their rifles, came slowly on, shouting to him the Dutch for “Hands up!”

The position was perilous, though the chances were even still about being taken or riding clear if he went at full gallop; but West did not stir.

“No, thankye, old fellow,” he said. “It would be such dull work riding alone. What do you say to taking cover amongst the bushes?”

“Bah! Cover for the front, and none for flank or rear!”

“We could squat down back to back,” said West coolly, “and shoot a few of them first. I want to fight the brutes with their own weapons.”

“Once more, will you make a bolt of it?” cried Ingleborough faintly.

“No—I—will—not!” said West slowly and distinctly, and then, making a dash, he caught his comrade round the waist, letting him sink gently down upon the sand and stones, for his legs had given way and his face turned ghastly.

“Thanks, old man,” said Ingleborough, with a feeble smile and his eyes looking his gratitude.

He lay still now, with his countenance seeming to grow fixed and hard; but West opened his water-flask and poured a few drops between the poor fellow’s lips, when he began to revive at once, and lay perfectly still while his comrade removed his hat and proceeded to bind the ready-folded handkerchief tightly about the bleeding wound, caused by sharp contact with a stone when he fell.

“West,” groaned Ingleborough, recovering now a little, “once more, lad, think, think; never mind me! Mount; never mind the firing; ride for your life!”

“Once more, old fellow,” said West, through his teeth, “I won’t leave you in the lurch!”

“But the despatches, lad. I am only one, and they are to save a thousand.”

“Ah!” cried West, springing to his feet as if the object of his journey had been driven out of his head by the excitement of the moment, and he took a step towards his horse, just as, to his intense surprise, Ingleborough’s mount suddenly threw up its muzzle, made a plunge, and found its feet, shook itself violently, and whinnied, as if it had just recovered from being stunned.

“Here, make one effort,” cried West, seizing the steed’s bridle and leading it to where its rider lay.

“Look—your pony’s all right again! Can you mount?”

“No,” said Ingleborough faintly, as he made an effort to struggle to his knees, but only fell back with a groan. “Can’t! Feel as if my neck’s broken and my shoulder numbed. Now will you make a dash while you can?”

West hesitated, and duty mastered friendship and humane feeling for his companion. He was but one, and the despatch might deal with the lives of a thousand men in peril of their lives.

“Yes, I must go!” he groaned, making for his horse; but he was too late.

For though the Boers, apparently from a feeling that they were quite sure of their prey, had advanced slowly and cautiously, each man with his rifle presented and finger on trigger, their movements showed plenty of cunning. They had opened out so as to get round the horses, watching the young man’s actions all the time, and when he at last made for his mount they were close up, and rifle-barrels bristled around, every muzzle threatening and grim.

“Throw up your hands!” came in chorus from a score of throats, and directly after the same order was given in fair English by two of the ragged, unkempt, big-bearded enemy.

West looked fiercely round like a hunted animal brought to bay by the hounds, waiting to seize the first one that sprang, and ground his teeth with rage; but he paid no heed to the men's words.

"Throw up your hands!" roared one of the men.

"Throw up your own!" said West defiantly, and then to his bitter annoyance he started on one side, for there was a flash, simultaneously a whizz close to his face, and instantly the sharp report of a rifle.

Recovering from the sudden shock to his nerves caused by his previous unbelief that the enemy would be so cowardly as to fire upon a perfectly helpless prisoner, West swung himself round to face the man who had fired at him from such close quarters that the flash of the powder had scorched his cheek.

The Boer was busily thrusting a fresh cartridge into the breech of his piece, and as he met the young man's eyes he burst out into a coarse and brutal laugh.

"Throw up your hands, then, you cursed rooinek!" he cried, "or I'll blow out your brains!"

"Not if I die for it!" cried West. "You cowardly cur!" And turning as the Boers closed him in, he continued, with bitter contempt, and speaking in their own tongue: "I suppose you are a specimen of the brave peasant farmers making a struggle for their liberty!"

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, young man," growled out one of the party in English, "unless you want to feed the crows!"

"You keep your cowardly gang in order first before you dictate to me!" cried West, turning upon the speaker sharply. "Do you call it manly to fire at close quarters upon a party of two?"

"No!" said the man shortly, as he turned round and said a few angry words in the Boer jargon—words which were received by some with angry growls, while the major portion remained silent and sullen.

"You're not our cornet! Mind your own business, before you're hurt!" cried

the man who had fired, taking a few steps towards the spot where West stood, and, seizing him savagely by the throat, he tried to force him to his knees.

But he tried only with one hand—his left—his right being engaged by his rifle, and to his utter astonishment the prisoner retorted by kicking his legs from under him and flinging him upon his back.

A yell of anger arose from some, and of delight from others, all looking on while the discomfited Boer sprang up with a cry of rage, cocked his rifle, and, taking quick aim, would have fired point-blank at the prisoner had not his act been anticipated by the Boer who had before spoken. Quick as thought he sprang upon his companion, striking the presented rifle upwards with a blow from his own, and then grasping the infuriated man by the collar.

“None of that!” he cried fiercely in Dutch. “Cornet or no cornet, I’m not going to stand by and see a cowardly murder done! We’ve got to fight, brother burghers, but we’ll fight like soldiers and men. Our name’s been stained enough by what has been done already.”

“Here, you’d better go and fight for the rooineks,” cried the discomfited Boer fiercely.

“I’m going to fight for my home and country, brothers,” cried West’s defender, “the same as you are: not help to murder a helpless boy who has behaved like a brave man.”

The portion of the force who had seemed disposed to side against the speaker were disarmed by his words, and there was a general cheer at this, while the cause of the trouble growled out: “You’re a traitor to your country, and the commandant shall hear of this.”

“No, no, no, no!” came in chorus. “Serves you right.”

West made no resistance now, as his defender signed to him to give up his rifle, which, plus the bandolier, was handed over with a sigh, Ingleborough’s having already been taken away.

The next thing done was to search the prisoners’ pockets—watch, purse,

and pocket-book being taken away, but the inner belts containing the greater part of their money were entirely overlooked, while West stood breathing hard, his face wrinkled up and an agonising pain contracting his heart, for the Boer who had defended him unbuttoned the flap of his haversack, thrust in his hand, and brought out a couple of cake loaves, and then, one after the other, two carefully wrapped-up sandwiches, standing for a few moments with them in his hand, hesitating, while Ingleborough, who had recovered his senses, darted a meaning look at his suffering companion.

“It’s all over with our expedition!” he said to himself. “Why didn’t poor Noll eat his sandwiches?”

The moments were as agonising to him as to West, who could only stand in silence; but, having become somewhat versed in the tricks of those who fought the law through his friendship with Norton, an idea crossed his mind, and turning in a faint appealing way to the Boer who seemed to be holding in suspense the scales of success and failure, he said: “Don’t take our bit of provisions away! We’re prisoners; isn’t that enough?”

The Boer fixed him with his eyes, noted his pallid face and the blood trickling down from the cut caused by his fall, and then, as if satisfied and moved by a feeling akin to compassion, he nodded his head, thrust the cake and the sandwich-like papers back into West’s haversack, and let it swing again under the young man’s arm.

“Lucky for them we’re not hungry!” he said, in his own tongue, “or we shouldn’t have left them much.”

“Why don’t you make them eat it?” cried the man who had fired. “For aught we know, it may be poisoned.”

“Bah!” cried their friend, who had done the pair so good a turn; “let them be!”

A couple of the Boers then approached with reins, but, in spite of the opposition that had taken place, the man who had taken West’s part again interfered, just as they proceeded to raise Ingleborough to bind his hands behind his back.

“There is no need!” said the man sharply. “Can’t you see that he is too weak to stand? Help him upon his horse, and one go on either side to keep him in the saddle.”

Then turning to West, he continued: “Mount; but you will be shot down directly if you attempt to escape.”

“I am not going to leave my friend,” said West coldly. “I could have galloped away had I wanted to. Let me walk by his side to help him.”

The man looked at the speaker searchingly and then nodded, West taking the place of one of the Boers, who placed himself just behind him with rifle ready. Then the little party moved off towards the kopje where the prisoners had been surprised.

“How are you?” asked West, as soon as they were in motion.

“I feel as if I were somewhere else!” was the half-laughing, half-bitter reply. “All use seems to have been completely knocked out of me, and the hills and kopjes go sailing round and round.”

“That will soon pass off,” said West, and then after a short pause: “Well, we’re prisoners after all. It does seem hard now we have got so far! I wonder where they’ll send us?”

“It does not much matter!” said Ingleborough. “Anywhere will do, if I can lie down and rest till this dreadful swimming and confusion passes off. As soon as it does we’ll escape—to eat the sandwiches,” he added meaningly.

“If we can,” said West; “but don’t talk about them again! Oh, Ingle, I wish I had your sharp wits.”

“Pooh! Where there’s a will there’s a way,” said Ingleborough faintly. “You might have escaped, but as you insisted upon being taken to share my lot I was obliged to do something, and now I must do nothing but think of how to get away.”

The effort of talking was evidently too much for the poor fellow, and West confined himself to keeping him upright in the saddle, from which he

would certainly have fallen but for his comrade's willing arm.

West was so fully occupied by his task, the two Boers offering not the slightest aid, that he paid no heed to the fact that their captors led them right round to the far side of the kopje, and then through a narrow gap of the rocks into a natural amphitheatre, wherein there was ample room for the formation of a great laager, the wagons being arranged in an irregular ellipse, thoroughly hidden from the veldt outside, while the rocks of the kopje roughly formed a rampart of vast strength, and apparently quite impregnable.

West took in all he could as he and his companion in misfortune were led through and within the barricade of wagons to where the horses and cattle were securely tethered, while a burst of cheering saluted the returning party as soon as it was seen that they had prisoners and a couple of likely-looking mounts. It was a surprise, for no one journeying across the veldt could for a moment have supposed that so secure a natural stronghold existed behind the rocky barriers.

The next minute the prisoners saw their sturdy ponies tied up to the tail of one of the great wagons, so near that West began to wonder whether when darkness came it would be possible to creep to their side, cut them free, mount, and make a old dash for liberty.

But a glance at Ingleborough showed him that this would be impossible, for the poor fellow had sunk over sidewise as soon as he had been lifted out of the saddle, and lay perfectly inert and with his eyes half-closed. West knelt down by him and, taking his slung water-bottle, he raised his injured companion's head a little and began to trickle, a few drops at a time, a little water between the sufferer's lips.

He was occupied in this way when he noted that a large group of the Boers had approached, one of whom, a short sturdy-looking individual, with swarthy skin and thick black beard plentifully sprinkled with grey, suddenly said, in good English: "What is the matter with him—shot?"

"No," replied West. "His horse was struck, and reared up, and my friend was thrown heavily upon his head."

"Oh, is that all?" said the Boer nonchalantly. "Let him sleep it off! But

listen, you: we shoot prisoners who try to escape."

"I shall not try to escape and leave him," said West coldly.

The Boer commandant, for such he proved to be, gave him a keen look and then turned away to speak to one of the men, the result of the orders he gave being that Ingleborough was carried to one of the wagons forming the laager, and West ordered to follow and wait upon his friend, who, after his injury had been carefully bathed and bandaged, sank into a swoon-like sleep, leaving West to sit thinking of their position and pondering upon the fact that the two Basuto ponies were tethered in sight of where he sat, and that he still had the treasured-up despatches safe.

His great trouble now seemed to be whether he should conceal the papers about his person or leave them in the haversack carelessly hung from the side of the wagon-tilt, lest he should be searched again and with a more serious result than the loss of watch and purse.

Night came at last, with the difficulty still unsolved, and a yet more serious one to keep him awake.

It was this: Ought he to wait till well on in the night, and then creep out by the sentry on duty outside, get to one of the ponies, and try and steal away?

And the time glided on, with the question still unanswered. There was the horse, and there was the despatch; but there were also the Boers by the hundred, hemming him completely in, and, even if he were disposed to leave Ingleborough to his fate, any attempt seemed to be mad to a degree.

Chapter Sixteen.

After a Rest.

West started up into wakefulness the next morning from a dream in which he was galloping for his life with the Boers in full pursuit, and then he sighed and wondered when and how he had dropped asleep, for he

could only recall being miserable, awake, and puzzled as to what to do, and then all seemed to have become blank till he was awakened by his captors' busy stir and the crackling of the fires being lighted.

West's first steps were to see to his companion, who did not seem to have moved, and the first feeling was one of satisfaction; but directly afterwards he felt uneasy, for Ingleborough seemed to be unnaturally still, and a shiver ran through him as he leaned over where his friend lay on the floor of the wagon, to place a hand upon the injured man's forehead below the bandage which made him look so ghastly.

Then came reaction as it was proved that the sufferer had only been in a deep sound sleep.

For Ingleborough's eyes opened, to gaze at him wonderingly.

"What's the matter? Oh, it's you, Noll!"

"Yes; you startled me!"

"Eh? What did I do?"

"You lay so still!"

"Did I? Oh, of course. I've been very fast asleep, I suppose. What time it is—nearly sundown?"

"No, it's morning—sunrise."

"I'm blessed! What, have I slept all night?"

West nodded and smiled.

"Soundly, I suppose!" he said. "But how are you?"

"Horribly stupid and muddled! I don't quite make out! Oh yes, I do now. I came down such a quelch that it knocked all the sense out of me, and my head feels all knocked on one side. But tell me: what about the despatch?"

“I have it all right so far!”

“That’s good. Where are our ponies?”

“Tied up yonder to the wheel of a wagon.”

“That’s good, too, lad! Then all we’ve got to do is to help ourselves to them the first chance and ride away.”

“Yes,” said West drily, “the first chance; but will there be a first chance?”

“Why not? It’s of no use to look at the black side of things! Where there’s ill luck there’s always good luck to balance it, and we’re bound to have our share of both. We had the bad yesterday; the good will come to-morrow, or next day, or the day after—who knows? We were not killed. You had your ear nicked and I had a bad fall which will cure itself as fast as the slit in your ear grows up. I call it grand to have saved the despatch! Are they going to give us any breakfast?”

“Hah!” sighed West; “you’ve done me good, Ingle. I was regularly in the dumps.”

“Keep out of them, then!” was the reply. “You didn’t expect to get your message delivered at Mafeking without any trouble, did you?”

“No, no, of course not! Then you think we might make a dash for it some time?”

“Of course I do; but I don’t suppose the chance will come to-day. Let’s hope that our next move may take us nearer our goal, for I don’t suppose the Boers will take us with them. They’ll send us prisoners to Pretoria, I suppose; and we must make our dash somewhere on the road.”

Ingleborough was right: the chance for the dash did not come that day, nor the next, nor the next. For the Boer commando did not stir from the natural stronghold which had been made its halting-place. In fact, two fresh parties, for which there was plenty of room, joined them, and a good deal of business went on: men going out on expeditions and returning: wagons laden with provisions and ammunition and two big field-pieces arriving, as if the force was being increased ready for some

important venture—all of which busy preparation took place under the eyes of the two prisoners, who, while being fairly well treated in the way of rations, were carefully guarded.

“One would like to know a little more what it all means!” said Ingleborough. “As it is, one seems to be quite in the dark!”

“And we’re doing nothing!” sighed West. “Oh, it’s terrible! I must begin to stir, even if it is only to bring about another check.”

“What would be the good of that?”

“Ease to one’s brain!” said West passionately. “Here have I been trusted with this mission and am doing nothing, while all the time the poor fellows at Mafeking must be watching despairingly for the despatch that does not come.”

“Look here, old lad,” said Ingleborough sympathetically; “when a fellow’s chained down hand and foot it’s of no use for him to kick and strain; he only makes his wrists and ankles sore and weakens himself, so don’t do it! Believe me, the proper time to act is when they take you out of your chains! It’s very depressing, I know; but what can’t be cured—”

“Must be endured. I know, Ingle; but here we are prisoners, and I can’t help getting more hopeless.”

“But you must! Things can’t go on like this much longer! Either our troops will come here and attack the Boers, or the Boers will go and attack the British. Just have patience and wait!”

“But here we are, just as we were nearly a week ago, and nothing has happened.”

“Oh yes, something has!” said Ingleborough, with a smile. “I’ve got well again! The first morning I couldn’t have mounted my pony and ridden off even if they had brought it to the end of the wagon here and said: ‘Be off!’ To-day I could jump on and go off at full gallop. Do you call that nothing?”

“No, of course not!” said West. “There, you must forgive me! I’m very discontented, I know; but you see why.”

“To be sure I do! I say, though, you’ve been at that satchel! The sandwiches are gone.”

West nodded.

“Haven’t eaten them, have you?”

“No, they’re sewed up in the belt of my jacket. I did it two nights ago, and I’m living in hopes that they will not search us again.”

“That’s it, is it? Well, I’m glad you did that! There, keep a good heart; something is sure to happen before long!”

“I only hope it may; even evil would be better than this miserable state of inaction. I think till I feel half-mad.”

“Well, we won’t hope for the evil, only for something in the way of change, if it’s only to pay a visit to Pretoria gaol.”

“What!”

“Only so as to get some news to give to old Norton when we get back. It will interest him. I wonder whether he’s keeping his eye on Master Plump-and-Pink. Well, I am blessed!”

“What is the matter? Are they making a move?” cried West excitedly, for Ingleborough had sprung to the end of their wagon prison to stand looking out.

“Someone has!” cried Ingleborough angrily. “Look here! Why, old Norton must have been asleep.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Bad Shillings always come back.

West stepped to his companion’s side, looked out between the rough curtains of the wagon, and saw a group of mounted Boers surrounding a

freshly-arrived wagon with its long team of bullocks, the black voorlooper at the head and the driver with his enormous whip on the box.

“Well,” said West, after a sharp glance, “there’s a fresh load of provisions, I suppose! What of it?”

“Rub your eyes, lad, and look again.”

“They don’t want rubbing.”

“Well, of all the fellows! Look there, beyond those mounted men who escorted the wagon in—there where the commandant and the dismounted party are talking together.”

“Yes, I see where you mean; but what has it to do with us? I don’t—yes, I do. Why, it’s Anson!” cried West excitedly.

“Anson it is! I began to think you were going blind!”

“But how strange! They have taken him prisoner then. Look here; we’re not going to have him with us.”

“It doesn’t look as if he is a prisoner,” said Ingleborough; “they all seem too friendly. I believe the scoundrel has deserted from the town and come to join the Boers. What has old Norton been about?”

“Is it possible?”

“Oh, it’s possible enough, if old Norton has been to sleep. Rats desert sinking ships!”

“Kimberley isn’t a sinking ship!” said West indignantly.

“I don’t know so much about that, lad! There is a very small force ready to defend it; it’s a long way from help; and, as we see here, the enemy is swarming down upon it from all directions. You see, it’s so far from our forces and so near to the Free State border.”

“Ah, there he is plainly enough, laughing with the commandant! Look, he clapped him on the shoulder!”

“Yes, I give him credit for anything!” said Ingleborough. “I shouldn’t wonder if he was in full correspondence with the Boers and is ready to sell us as well as buy diamonds. As likely as not, he has slipped away with his swag so as to escape before the fighting begins. But how Norton can have let him get away is more than I can understand!”

“Well, it’s plain enough that he’s here!” said West; “and I can’t help feeling glad that he is not a prisoner, for if he had been put with us it must have come to a quarrel. Look here, seeing what the treacherous thief is, we ought to denounce him to the commandant.”

“Don’t do anything of the kind! What good would it do?”

“But he is such a despicable wretch!”

“What’s that to you?”

“Ingleborough!”

“Oh yes, I know what you’re ready to say; but you’ve got something else to do besides playing the virtuous part of denouncing Master Anson as a diamond-dealer. Besides, I don’t believe the Boers would think any the less of him if they believed you.”

“They couldn’t help believing our evidence!” said West.

“Nonsense! It isn’t your business!”

“It’s every honest man’s business!” cried West hotly.

“Not if he is on Government service with a despatch to deliver in Mafeking,” said Ingleborough, with a peculiar look at his companion.

“Hah!” cried West; “you are right again! But—oh!”

“Oh, what?”

“Why, he was present when we volunteered to carry the despatch!”

“To be sure, so he was!” cried Ingleborough excitedly.

“Then as soon as he knows we have been captured he’ll denounce me to the commandant as the bearer of the message, and oh, Ingle, we shall be searched again!”

“Yes,” was the thoughtful reply; “and you’ve got it on you. We might change jackets, but that would be no good. Could you rip it out of yours?”

“Yes, of course, in a few moments.”

“Then you’d better.”

“Not now; it’s too late. We must wait for a better opportunity.”

“But—”

“No, no, I tell you,” cried West excitedly; “look, he’s not a prisoner. The scoundrel has recognised us and is coming here. Why, Ingleborough, he’s a traitor—a rebel. No wonder he got through the Boer lines. Look! there can be no doubt about it; he has joined their side. Those men, the Boer leaders, the commandants and field-cornets, cannot know that he is a thief.”

“But they soon shall!” answered Ingleborough hoarsely.

“No, no, keep quiet,” whispered West; “he’s laughing with them and coming here. Don’t say a word; wait! It’s my advice now.”

“If I can!” muttered Ingleborough. “The skunk! He’s sending the blood dancing through my veins! He must be denounced, and if he begins to say a word about your volunteering to bear the despatch I’ll let him have it hot and strong.”

“Why, you seem to have completely turned your coat!” said West bitterly.

“I have! What we have just been saying has stirred up all my bile. But I wish I could turn your coat too—out of the wagon.”

“Why not?” said West, as a thought occurred to him, and running to the other end of the vehicle, stripping off his jacket as he did so, he thrust out his head and called to the sentry whose duty it was to guard against any

attempt to escape.

“What is it?” said the man quietly.

“Take my coat and hang it on the rocks yonder,” he said. “I’ve been sleeping in it night after night, and it’s all fusty and damp. Out yonder, right in the sun.”

The request was so simple and reasonable that the man nodded, took the jacket, and was turning to go away.

“Don’t let anyone meddle with it,” said West; “it’s my only one, and I don’t want a Kaffir to carry it off.”

“He’d better not try!” said the Boer, with a meaning laugh, and he bore the jacket right away to where the sun was beating hotly upon the rock, where the next minute the garment was spread out.

“Talk about me having a ready wit in an emergency!” said Ingleborough merrily; “why, I’m a baby to you, West, my son! There: I’m proud of you.”

“Oh, but the risk!” whispered the young man. “That precious garment lying carelessly yonder!”

“Carelessly? That’s just the way to keep it safe. Who’d ever think of examining the coat lying out there?”

“The first man who goes near it!”

“The first rogue, and he’d only feel in the pockets. But there’s no fear: that sentry would fire at any thief who tried to steal! That’s safe enough!”

“I wish I could think so!” replied West. “The first thing when they come will be to ask me what I have done with my jacket.”

“Pooh! In that loose, dark flannel shirt they’ll never think of it. I thought they’d have been here, though, before now.”

They had to wait for some little time still, for the Boers had gathered about the new-comer, forming a half-circle, evidently to listen while Anson

talked to them earnestly, his gesticulations suggesting to Ingle borough, rightly or wrongly, that he was describing the arrangements for defence made by the British garrison at Kimberley, which he had so lately left; and as he spoke every now and then the listeners nodded, slapped the stocks of their rifles, turned to make remarks to one another, and gave the speaker a hearty cheer.

“Oh, you beauty!” growled Ingleborough. “I can’t hear a word you say; but I’m as certain as if I were close up that you’re telling those chuckle-headed Dutch that all they’ve got to do is to march straight in and take Kimberley, for they’ll find it as easy as kissing their hands.”

“If he is telling them the weak points it’s downright treason,” said West bitterly, after a glance out of the wagon in the direction of the rocks on which lay his jacket.

“It’s stand him up with a firing party, and a sergeant with a revolver to finish the work if it isn’t quite done,” said Ingleborough. “The cowardly scoundrel: he’ll be getting his deserts at last! I say, though, isn’t it sickening? A blackguard like that, who doesn’t stop at anything to gain his ends!”

For Anson had finished speaking and the Boers had closed round him, patting him on the back and pressing forward one after the other to shake his hand, while he smiled at them in his mildest, blandest way.

After a few more friendly words the ex-clerk began slouching slowly up, followed by half-a-dozen of the principal men, till he was close to the tail of the prison wagon where West and Ingleborough were seated trying to look perfectly indifferent, but the former with his heart beating heavily and a flush coming hotly into his cheeks, when the Boers stopped short, leaving Anson to speak, listening the while as if they anticipated a little amusement from their new friend the informer hailing the prisoners in the wain.

“Hullo!” cried Anson, with one of his most irritating smiles—one full of the triumph over them he enjoyed and the contempt he felt, “hullo! Who’d have thought that the virtuous West and the enthusiastic sham detective Ingleborough would have come out here to join the Boers? But don’t tell

me. I know: I can see how it is. You've both been bled, and that's let some of the bounce out of you."

He stopped for a moment for those he insulted to reply, but as they both sat looking at him in cool contempt he went on jeeringly: "The Boers know what they're about, I see. When a horse has the megrims they bleed him in the ear, and judging that the same plan would do for a donkey they've bled cocky West there, and bull-headed Ingleborough on the skull."

West's face grew of a deeper red, and he drew in a long deep breath, for those of the Boers who understood English burst into a hearty laugh at this sally of the renegade's.

"Well, I'm glad of it!" continued Anson, taking the Boers' laughter as so much approval. "It was all you wanted, Bully West, and I daresay, now that you've come to your senses, you'll make a decent Boer. There, I'll give you a recommendation for a clerkship, for you do really write a decent hand."

"Say thanks," growled Ingleborough, with a sneer which told of his contempt; "he will no doubt have plenty of interest. He has come up to lead the Boer army's band and give lessons on the flute."

Anson started as if he had been stung.

"Quiet, man, quiet!" whispered West to Ingleborough; but it was in vain.

Chapter Eighteen.

The Ringing of the Shilling.

People make their plans in cold blood and forget all about them when the blood grows hot.

It was so here. West had made up his mind what to do while cool, but acted just in the fashion he had cried out against to his companion.

For as soon as Anson lounged up to them in his supercilious jaunty way, West's cool blood warmed, grew hot at the scoundrel's contemptuous look of triumph, and at the insult respecting the Boers boiled over.

"How dare you!" he raged out. "Keep your distance, you contemptible cur, or, prisoner though I am, I'll give you such a thrashing as shall make you yell for mercy!"

"Hullo! What does this mean?" said one of the Boer officers, closing up, followed by the others.

"The prisoner is a bit saucy!" said Anson contemptuously. "You did not bleed him enough!"

"You know these two?" asked the officer.

"Well, in a way," said Anson, in a haughty, indifferent tone. "They were a pair of underlings where I was engaged at the diamond-mines. Insolent bullying fellows, both of them! But you'll tame them down."

The Boer leader nodded.

"A bit sore at being taken prisoners!" he said.

"No," cried West; "it is the fortune of war, sir. We are Englishmen, and we made a dash to escape Kimberley, and got through your investing lines."

"To carry despatches to the rooineks?"

“No,” replied West. “Your men searched us and found no despatches.”

“Messages then. You were going to the British forces?”

“We should have joined them after a time, perhaps,” said West, speaking more coolly.

“He’s lying!” said Anson sharply. “Have them searched again!”

The Boer commandant nodded, gave the order, and half-a-dozen of his men came forward, after which the prisoners were ordered out of the wagon, and they let themselves down, when they were thoroughly searched from head to heel—of course, without result, and the Boer chief turned frowningly to Anson.

“They must have hid the letter somewhere about the wagon then!”

“Two of you get in and search!” said the commandant.

This was carefully carried out, and the men descended.

“Then they must have destroyed their message before you took them,” cried Anson, “or somehow since.”

“They were carefully searched as soon as they were taken,” observed one of the field-cornets.

“Yes,” said the commandant, “and I saw it done. Well, they will not carry any news to Mafeking. Tell them that the British are being swept into the sea east and south, and their rule is at an end. I want brave men who can ride and fight, so if they like to join the Federal forces and do their duty there will be a prosperous time for them. If they refuse there will be a long imprisonment, perhaps something worse.”

“Mr Anson, the renegade, need not trouble himself, sir,” said West quietly. “Neither my companion nor I will do as he has done.”

“You had better!” said Anson sneeringly. “It’s a grand chance for you now your characters are gone and the I.D. detectives are after you.”

Ingleborough looked at the speaker sharply; but Anson made believe not to notice it and went on.

“You’ve no character now, either of you,” he continued coolly. “Old Norton came after me as I was trekking south, utterly sick of the English lot. He came on the old pretext: that I had bought diamonds and was carrying them off. He searched again, and then I told him the simple truth—that you two had volunteered to carry despatches so as to get clear off with the swag you had acquired—after accusing me; but he professed not to believe me, and took me back to Kimberley, but the very next day he started off with half-a-dozen men to fetch you back, and I came away.”

“With the diamonds you had hidden?” said Ingleborough sharply.

“Perhaps,” replied Anson coolly. “So, you see, you had better join our party, for even if you escaped it would only be for the police superintendent to get hold of you both, and if he did, you wouldn’t find him such an excellent friend.”

“Wants thinking about!” said Ingleborough drily. “But ‘our’ party—‘our’?”

“Yes,” said Anson coolly. “I’ve made up my mind to belong to the right owners of the country for a long time past. We’ve got the gold at Johannesburg, and the diamonds at Kimberley are ours by right, and we’re going to have them.”

There was a murmur of satisfaction from the Boers at this, and Anson went on nonchalantly: “That is one reason why I consented to serve the company in such a beggarly position. I wanted to learn all I could about the mining so that it might come in useful when we of the Boer party took possession.”

“And then, I suppose,” said Ingleborough, “you’ll expect to be manager-in-chief?”

“Well, I don’t go so far as that,” said Anson; “but, with my knowledge of the management of the mining business, I feel sure my Boer friends will find it to their advantage to retain me high up on the staff. You see, there are so many things in the way of checking losses which I have mastered.”

“Stopping the illicit-diamond-buying and selling, for instance,” said Ingleborough sarcastically.

“Exactly!” replied Anson, apparently without noticing the sarcasm; “and I’ve been thinking that no doubt I could put a good thing in both your ways. Of course, we have been bad enough friends; but I’ll pass over all that if you’ll serve me as faithfully as you did the company. What do you say?”

“Say?” cried West.

“Stop! Hold hard, Oliver!” cried Ingleborough, stopping him short; “this is a thing that can’t be settled in a minute. We want time. All I say now, Mr Anson, is that I’m glad we bear such a good character, seeing that we are illicit-diamond-dealers escaping with the plunder that we haven’t got.”

“Exactly!” said Anson. “Very well, then, I’ll give you till to-morrow night to think it over, and you’ll soon see which side your bread’s buttered.”

“Don’t stop me, Ingle,” said West hotly. “I can’t stand this. I must speak. This—”

A sharp report from behind the wagon checked further words, and every man made a rush for this place or that in full expectation that a sudden attack had been made upon the laager within the rocky walls.

At the same moment a Kaffir of the blackest type and with his hair greased up into the familiar Zulu ring bounded into sight, tripped, fell upon his hands, sprang up again, ran on, and disappeared, whilst a rush was made for the man who fired, leaving Anson and the prisoners together.

The next minute West’s blood felt as if it was running cold in his veins as he saw, only a few yards from him and close to the stone upon which his jacket had been stretched, the sentry slowly re-loading his pistol. But the coat was gone.

West had hard work to repress a groan. “My orders were to fire at anyone I saw stealing,” said the man surlily, and West heard every word.

“Well, who was stealing?” asked one of the officers.

“A Kaffir,” replied the sentry. “I’d got a jacket stretched out upon the stones yonder, to get aired in the sunshine, and I only took my eyes off it for a minute, when I saw a foot rise up from behind a stone, grab hold of the coat with its toes—”

“Nonsense!” cried the officer; “a foot could not do that!”

“Not do it?” said the man excitedly. “It had to do it; and it was creeping away, when I fired, and the black sprang up and ran.”

“Where’s the jacket?”

The officer’s question woke an echo in West’s breast, and he started, for it was just as if the question was repeated there, and it seemed to be echoed so loudly that he fancied those near must have heard it.

“He’s got it, I suppose,” said the sentry coolly. “Carried it away, and a bullet too somewhere in his carcass.”

A miserably despondent feeling attacked West at these words, for he had clung to the hope that he might be able to recover the despatch, succeed in escaping and delivering it in safety, however late; while now the desire to get away died out, for how could he return to Kimberley and confess that he had failed?

He turned to glance at Ingleborough, who met his eyes and then shrugged his shoulders as much as to say: “It’s a bad job, and I pity you.”

At that moment a hand was clapped heavily upon West’s shoulder, and the Boer who had saluted him so roughly pointed to the wagon, and he saw that his companion was being treated in the same way, while, the scare being over, upon their walking back and preparing to climb in, they were called upon to stop. Naturally the prisoners obeyed, and, turning, they found the group of Boers in earnest conversation once more with Anson, who at the end of a few minutes nodded decisively and approached his two old fellow-clerks, making West’s heart begin to thump with excitement and his eyes gleam, for the despair he felt at the loss he had sustained made him ready to turn fiercely upon the first

enemy who addressed him.

“Take it calmly!” whispered Ingleborough. “Let me diplomatise. You’ll do no good by making a row.”

“Take it calmly!” whispered back West, “and at a time like this! I can’t!”

“Look here, you two,” said Anson coolly. “Let’s have no more bones about the matter. These gentlemen say they have too much to think about to bother over any shilly-shallying on the part of a couple of prisoners. You know it’s a good chance, and I’ve told them you’ll both join along with me. Just tell them out and out you will.”

“You miserable renegade, how dare you!” cried West fiercely.

“Here, what does that mean?” cried the Boer commandant sharply.

“Shamming!” replied Anson, with a contemptuous laugh. “They’re going to join us, knowing, as they do, that the game is all up at Kimberley; but they put on all this make-believe. They want to be able to say that they were forced to serve, so as to hedge—so as to make it all comfortable with their consciences, as they call them.”

“It is false!” cried West furiously—“a tissue of lies! Don’t believe him; this man is no better than a miserable contemptible thief!”

“What!” shouted Anson, lowering the rifle he carried and taking a step forward with what was intended to be a fierce aspect.

But he only took one step, being checked suddenly by the action of West, who, regardless of the weapon, sprang at him, and would have wrenched away the rifle had he not been seized by a couple of the Boers, who held him fast.

“Pooh! I don’t want to shoot the wretched cad!” said Anson contemptuously. “An old fellow-clerk of mine! He’s savage and jealous of my position here! He always was an ill-tempered brute!”

“But he says that you are a thief!” said the Boer commandant sternly.

“Pooh! A spiteful man would say anything!” cried Anson contemptuously. “Look here, sir, I’ve watched the Boer troubles from the first: I’ve seen how the English have been trying to find an excuse for seizing the two republics: I know how they got possession of the great diamond-mines by a trick arranged with the surveyors of the boundaries.”

There was a low murmur of assent here from the gathering crowd of Boers who had now surrounded him.

“Yes,” he said, raising his voice, “I knew all the iniquities of the British Government—how the English had seized the diamond-fields, and how they were trying to get the gold-mines, and as soon as the war broke out I made up my mind to join the people fighting for their liberty.”

There was a burst of cheering from the few who could follow the speaker, and then a roar as soon as his words were explained to the crowd, while Anson looked round with his fat face growing shiny, as he beamed upon his hearers.

“Yes,” said the Boer leader coldly; “but this young man, who knows you, charges you with being a thief.”

“All cowardly malice!” cried Anson contemptuously, and giving his fingers a snap. “A thief?—a robber?—nonsense. Pooh! I only dealt in and brought away with me a few of the stones, which were as much mine as theirs. I was not coming away from the enemy empty-handed. I said to myself that I’d spoil the Egyptians as much as I could, and I did.”

There was a shout of delight at this, and one of the field-cornets gave the speaker a hearty slap on the shoulder.

“Yes, I brought some away,” continued Anson, rejoicing fatly in the success of his words; and, raising his voice, he said, first in English and then in Boer-Dutch: “I brought some away, and I wish I had brought more.”

There was a fresh and a long-continued roar of delight, repeated again and again, giving the speaker time to collect his thoughts, and as soon as he could gain silence he continued.

“Look here,” he said: “I came and joined the Boers because I believed their cause to be just; and I said to myself, knowing what I do of the secrets of the diamond-mines, I will be the first as soon as Kimberley is taken to show the commandants where the British tyrants have hidden away the stones that belong of right to the Boers, the stones that have been stolen from the earth—the land they fought for and won with their blood from the savage black scum who infested the country. I know where the stones are hidden away, and I can, if you like, lead you to what the British think you will never find. But if you are going to believe the words of this malicious boy, and consider me to be a common thief, I’ve done. You can have the few paltry stones I brought away to sell and pay for my bread and meat till the war is over, and let me go. I don’t want to act as your guide into Kimberley! It’s nothing to me! I have told you what I did; and what is more, I’d do it again!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, in a whisper to West, as he sat holding his hand to his injured head: “I believe him there.”

West nodded, and the next minute they saw Anson being led away in triumph by a crowd of Boers; but the commandant, with half-a-dozen more who seemed to be officers, and the man who had defended them when they were captured, remained close by the prisoners, talking together.

Soon after, the commandant approached them, glanced at Ingleborough, who lay back, evidently in pain, and then turned to West: “You heard what your old friend said?”

“Yes,” replied West.

“It is all true?”

“His base confession is,” said West boldly. “The man is a detected illicit-diamond-dealer.”

“He only bought what the British wrongly claimed!” said the Boer warmly. “What right had they to make laws forbidding people to buy what was freely given up by the earth for the benefit of all?”

“It is of no use for me to argue about the matter!” said West coolly. “I shall

never convince you, and you will never convince me."

"Oh yes, I should, after you had come to your senses! There, we are not brutes, only men fighting for our liberties, and I like you, for you are brave and manly. Why not join our cause? It is just."

West looked the Boer full in the eyes, thinking the while that the man spoke in all sincerity and belief that his cause was right.

"Well, what do you say?" cried the Boer.

West tightened his lips and shook his head.

The Boer frowned and turned to Ingleborough.

"Well," he said, "you join us, and you will not repent. Prove faithful, and you will gain a place of trust among us!"

West listened for his comrade's reply.

"Oh, I can't join without him," said Ingleborough. "He's master, and I'm only man!"

"Then he was bearer of the despatch—what that man Anson said was true?"

"Oh yes, that part of his story was true enough."

"That you were despatch-riders on the way to Mafeking—you two?"

"Quite right."

"And you two had been diamond-dealers, and brought away a quantity?"

"Just as many, as we schoolboys used to say, as you could put in your eye with the point of a needle. All a lie! Anson was putting his own case. All we brought away was the despatch."

"Then where is it?" said the Boer sharply.

"I don't know; I was not the bearer," said Ingleborough quietly, "But you

know where it is now?”

“I—do—not,” said Ingleborough firmly. “I have not the slightest idea where it is!”

“Then you have sent it on by someone else?”

“No,” said Ingleborough. “There, you know that we have failed, and if you set us at liberty, all we can do is to go back to Kimberley and say what has happened.”

“You will not go back to Kimberley,” said the Boer, speaking with his eyes half-closed, “and if you did it would only be to go into prison, for the Diamond City is closely besieged, and if not already taken it will in a few days be ours. There, go back to your wagon, and spend the time in thinking till I send for you again. The choice is before you—a good position with us, or a long imprisonment before you are turned out of the country.”

He pointed towards their temporary place of confinement, and then turned away, while a couple of the Boers marched them to the wagon and left them in the sentry’s charge.

Chapter Nineteen.

The Sky Clears.

Once more in the wagon, one ox a pair of despondent prisoners, hot in temper as well as in person with the excitement of what he had so lately gone through, West cast himself down upon the floor ready to groan, while his more experienced, harder comrade sat down cross-legged to think.

“If I only knew where the coat was!” said West, with a groan.

“Hah!” sighed Ingleborough. “I’m afraid it’s gone for ever! That Kaffir was one of the Boers’ slave-like servants, of course, or he wouldn’t have been in the camp; and after the attempt at theft, if he was not too badly

wounded, he would bolt right off for his own people. It's a sad business, old lad: but I don't think you need fear that it will fall into the Boers' hands."

"No, I don't fear that!" replied West. "But it is the misery and shame of the failure that worries me! I did so mean to succeed!"

"Hah! Yes," sighed Ingleborough again; "but someone said—hang me if I know who!—''Tis not in mortals to command success.' You're only a mortal, old fellow, and you must make the best of it."

West groaned.

"It's horribly hard; just, too, as I had hatched out a way of escape," continued Ingleborough.

"I don't want to escape now."

"What? You don't mean to join the Boers as old Fat Face suggested?"

"Why not?" said West dismally. "I dare not go back to Kimberley."

"You daren't turn traitor to your country, and, though you feel right down in the dumps, you dare go back to Kimberley and walk straight to the Commandant and speak out like a man, saying: 'I did my best, sir; but I failed dismally!'"

"Ah!" sighed West.

"And he would reply: 'Well, it's a bad job, my lad; but it's the fortune of war.'"

West held out his hand as he sat there tailor-fashion by his friend in the bottom of the wagon, and there was a warm grip exchanged.

"Bravo, boy! You're coming round! I knew it. You only wanted time."

"Thank you, Ingle! Now then, what was your idea of escaping?"

"Oh, a very simple one, but as likely to succeed as to fail."

“Tell me at once! It will keep me from thinking about that miserable despatch.”

“And the jacket! You and I will have to take turn and turn with mine when the cold nights come, unless we pretend to lovely Anson that we are going to stop, and ask him to get you a fresh covering for your chest and back.”

“Oh, none of that, Ingle! I can’t bear lying subterfuges. I’d sooner bear the cold of the bitter nights.”

“Don’t use big words, lad! Subterfuge, indeed! Say *dodge*—a war dodge. But about my plan! You have noticed that for some reason they have not taken our ponies away.”

“Yes, they are still tethered to the wheel ox that wagon. What of that? It would be impossible to get to them and ride out unchallenged.”

“Oh no: not my way!”

“What is your way?” said West excitedly.

“Last night was dark as pitch.”

“Yes; but there are double lines of sentries about.”

“With sharp eyes too; but there was a commando rode out, evidently to patrol the country and look out for our people.”

“Yes; I heard them ride away.”

“And I heard them come back at daybreak; but I was too lazy to get up.”

“I don’t see what you are aiming at,” said West wearily; “but I suppose you have some good idea—I hope a plausible one.”

“I think it is, old lad,” said Ingleborough, speaking now in a low whisper. “Suppose when that commando musters after dark—I am supposing that one will go out again to-night—suppose, I say, when it musters we had crept out of the wagon and crawled as far as that one where our ponies

are tethered?”

West’s hand stole forward to grip his comrade’s knee.

“Ah, you’re beginning to grasp it!” said Ingleborough. “Then, as I still have my knife, suppose I cut the reins and we mounted.”

“And joined the muster?” said West, in a hoarse whisper.

“It isn’t a dragoon troop, with men answering the roll-call and telling off in fours from the right.”

“No, just a crowd!” said West excitedly.

“Exactly! There’s only one reason why we shouldn’t succeed.”

“What’s that?”

“We don’t look rough and blackguardly enough.”

“Oh, Ingle, I quite grasp it now!”

“I’ve been quite aware of that, old lad, for the last minute—that and something else. I don’t know what will have happened when the war is over, but at present I don’t wear a wooden leg. Oh, my knee! I didn’t think your fingers were made of bone.”

“I beg your pardon, old fellow!”

“Don’t name it, lad! I’m very glad you have so much energy in you, and proud of my powers of enduring such a vice-like—or say vicious—grip without holloaing out. Next time try your strength on Anson! Why, your fingers would almost go through his fat.”

“Ingle, we must try it to-night.”

“Or the first opportunity.”

“Why didn’t you think of that before we lost the despatch?”

“Hah! Why didn’t I? Suppose it didn’t come!”

West rose and crept to the end of the wagon and looked out.

“The ponies are still there,” he whispered, and then he started violently, for a voice at the other end of the wagon cried: “Hallo, you two!”

West turned, with his heart sinking, convinced that the man must have heard.

“I’m just off sentry!” the Boer said good-humouredly. “I must have shaved that Kaffir somewhere and not hurt him much. As soon as I was relieved I went and had a good look for him; but there wasn’t so much as a drop of blood.”

“Poor wretch!” thought West.

“Lucky for him!” said Ingleborough, in Dutch.

“But I made the beggar drop the jacket,” said the Boer, laughing; and, to the delight of the prisoners, he sent it flying into the wagon.

That was all, and the sentry strode away, just as West bounded upon the recovered garment like a tiger upon its prey.

“Say bless him!” whispered Ingleborough.

“Oh, Ingle!” groaned his companion, in a choking voice: “I can feel the despatch quite safe.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Ingleborough.

“And such a little while ago I was ready to curse fate and the very hour I was born!”

“And very wrong of you too, my son!” said Ingleborough, in tones which betrayed some emotion. “Cursing’s a very bad habit, and only belongs to times when wicked old men lived in old-fashioned plays and indulged in it upon all kinds of occasions, especially when they had sons and daughters who wanted to marry somebody else.”

“Oh, Ingle! Oh, Ingle! The sky doesn’t look so covered with black clouds

now.”

“By no means, my lad! I can see enough blue sky to make a Dutchman a pair of breeches—for Dutchman let’s say Boer. I say, what do you say to going out on patrol to-night?”

“Yes, yes, of course! But we have no guns!”

“Nor bandoliers, and that’s a fact! Well, it’s of no use to think of getting our own back again, even if we said we repented and meant to join the Boers at once.”

“They wouldn’t trust us!”

“Too slim! Fools if they did!”

“Then it is hopeless!” said West. “Someone would notice it at once!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, “and those were beautiful rifles too. But look here: I could see a way out of the difficulty, only you are so scrupulous. One mustn’t tell a diplomatic fib.”

“I can’t stand telling an outrageous lie, even under stern necessity!” said West, pulling down his jacket after putting it on.

“And you are so horribly honest!”

“Yes,” said West bitterly. “I have not, as Anson declared, been busy buying illicit-diamonds. But why do you say this—what do you mean?”

“I meant that I’d have risked it as soon as it was dark, and crept away to steal a couple of the Boers’ Mausers—just like a cat—mouser after Mauser—I say, what a horrible joke!”

West was silent.

“They say they’re splendid pieces; but it would be a terrible theft, because I should take the bandoliers too.”

West was still silent.

“I say, lad,” whispered Ingleborough, laughing gently: “you couldn’t object to my stealing the rifles that would be used to kill our men.”

“How would you manage?” whispered West.

“Hah!” sighed Ingleborough, relieving his breast of a long pent-up breath, as he looked up at the arched-in wagon-tilt: “this fellow’s very nearly as wicked as I am.”

“Don’t—don’t joke!” said West: “the matter is too serious. How would you manage?”

“Never you mind, old Very Particular! Leave that to me! By the way, though, before I lie down and have a good nap, in case I should be out all night, I don’t think there is the slightest probability of our joining the Boer forces, do you?”

“Not the slightest!” answered West drily. “There’ll be plenty of traitors to their country without us!”

Five minutes later Ingleborough, whose head troubled him more than he owned to, was sleeping soundly, leaving West thinking deeply over the prospects of a daring escape, and every now and then glancing out and across the laager to make sure that the ponies had not been moved, as well as to fix the position of every wagon well in his mind ready for the time when his comrade and he would be stealing across in the dark, and thinking at times that the Boers must be mad to leave their prisoners’ mounts tethered in sight of their temporary prison.

“But they’re altogether mad!” he mused, “or they would never have dared to defy the power of England in the way they have done!”

This thought had hardly passed through his mind when he saw a group of the laager’s occupants come by the prison wagon, each with a couple of well-filled bandoliers crossbelt-fashion over his breast, and rifle slung, making for the range forming one side of the laager. They broke up into twos and threes, and as they approached they unslung their weapons and took off their cartridge-belts to place them beneath the wagon-tilts, while they settled down to prepare a meal before having a rest.

“Just come off duty!” thought the prisoner, and, with his heart beating fast, he sat watching two of the men and then gazing hard at the nearest wagon, piercing in imagination the thick canvas covering spread over the arching-in hoops, and seeing, as he believed, exactly where two Mauser rifles and the Boers’ bandoliers had been laid.

“Why, if it were dark,” he thought, “I could creep out and secure those two rifles as easily as possible—if they were not taken away!”

West’s face turned scarlet, and it was not from the heat of the sun upon the wagon-tilt, nor from the sultry air which passed in from one end and out at the other.

He drew a deep breath and moved towards Ingleborough to tell him of the burning thoughts within him; but his comrade was sleeping so peacefully that he shrank from awakening him.

“He’ll want all his strength!” thought West, and then he fell to wondering whether or not they would succeed.

The plan was so wonderfully simple that it seemed very possible, but—

Yes, there were so many “buts” rising up in the way. The slightest hitch would spoil all, and they would be detected and subjected to the roughest of usage, even if they were not shot. But it was worth the risk, and the thinker’s heart began to beat faster, and his hand stole to the part of his jacket where he had hidden the despatch, and as he did so he mentally saw himself and his companion riding through the darkness with the Boers, and waiting for an opportunity to dash off, taking the enemy so by surprise that they would be off and away and well into the gloom before they could be followed.

Once well mounted, with the open veldt before them, and the darkness for their friend, he felt that it would go hard if they did not escape.

He had come to this point, and was full of a wild exhilaration, feeling at heart that the venture only wanted the dash with which they would infuse it, when his attention was taken up by seeing the Boer leader with about half-a-dozen of his field-cornets pass by the open end of the tent and cross the laager.

He watched them with some anxiety, and then all at once his heart began to sink with a sudden attack of despair, for two of the party went off in front, unfastened the reins by which the two Basuto ponies were tethered to the wagon-wheels, and led them to where the Boer leader and the rest had halted, prior to putting the little animals through their paces as if to test their powers in connection with some object in view.

A castle in the air dashed down into nothingness, and he uttered a low groan, which made Ingleborough start up with a wondering look in his eyes.

Chapter Twenty.

How to Escape.

“What’s wrong?” said Ingleborough, in a whisper.

“Look out at the bottom of the wagon,” was West’s reply.

Ingleborough rose to his knees, and at a glance grasped the meaning of his companion’s troubled look.

“Going to adopt our little Basutos for their own use, eh?” he said coolly. “Well, I wonder they haven’t done it before! Bah! There are plenty more horses about! What worries me is how I’m to get a couple of rifles and the ammunition. I was rather too cock-a-hoop about that when I talked to you, for these beloved Dutch cuddle up their pieces as if they loved them with all their hearts.”

West smiled.

“Oh, don’t do that because I said cuddled.”

“I smiled because I see the way to get a couple of rifles as soon as it’s dark,” said West, and he told what he had noted.

“Then there’s no reason for you to look glum. I’ll get a couple of horses somehow if you’ll get the guns. Here, I’d whistle or sing if I were not

afraid of taking the sentry's attention. We're all right, lad, and that bit of sleep has taken away the miserable pain in my head which I keep on having since my fall. Now then, what are they going to do with those ponies?"

Sitting well back, the prisoners watched all that went on, and saw the ponies mounted and put through their paces by a couple of big Boers of the regular heavy, squat, Dutch build.

"Bah! What a shame!" whispered Ingleborough; "it's murdering the poor little nags. A regular case for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Those fellows want a couple of dray-horses to carry them."

"Yes, and they've found it out," said West softly.

For as they looked on they saw the two Boers pull up after a canter up and down the full length of the laager, and then drop clumsily off, with the result that the ponies spread out their legs and indulged in a good shake which nearly dislodged their saddles.

Then a couple more of the onlookers tried the little mounts, but stopped after one trot up and down, and a general conversation ensued, resulting in the ponies being led off and tied up again in the same place, making West's heart beat as fast as if he had been running hard, while all the time he tried to crush down a feeling of elation, lest he should be premature in his hopefulness and be met with a fresh disappointment, for, though he saw the reins fastened in the same places, there was plenty of time before dark for the ponies to be removed.

Just then their examination of the Boers' proceedings was brought to an end by one of their captors bringing the roughly-prepared portion of food that was served out to them every day.

It was rough, but good of its kind, for the Boers seemed to like to live well, and they did not stint their prisoners, who, at a word from Ingleborough, fell to at once.

"Appetite or no appetite, eat all you can," he said. "We may have to work very hard to-night, and shall need all our strength."

There was a fair amount left after they had done, and this was carefully tied up ready for taking with them if they were successful that night. After this there was nothing more to be done but to wait till darkness fell, and they sat back watching while the sentry was again changed, when the fresh man visited the wagon, to climb in, look carefully round, and eye them suspiciously before returning to his post.

“Does that fellow suspect anything?” whispered West.

“Of course; but nothing fresh. He comes on duty under the full impression that we mean to escape if we can, and he feels that if we attempt it his duty is to send a bullet through each of us.”

“Then you don’t think he suspects that we are going to make an attempt to-night?”

“Pooh! How could he? But look! There goes Anson! Not coming here, is he?”

“No: going to his own wagon! I say, Ingle, do you think he has any illicit-diamonds with him?”

“I’m sure of it! He could not, according to his nature, have come away without robbing the company somehow. I only wish I had the searching of his wagon! I suppose Norton did not have a chance!”

“Yes, look! He has gone to his wagon. Where should you search if you had the chance?”

“Not quite sure yet!” said Ingleborough gruffly. “But don’t talk to me. I want to think of something better than diamonds.”

“You mean liberty?”

“That’s right. And now, once for all, we don’t want to make any more plans: each knows what he has to do, and as soon as it is dark he has to do it.”

“No,” said West gravely; “your part must wait until I have managed to get the rifles.”

“Well, yes; I must not be in too great a hurry. But I say, wouldn’t it be better for us to go together to the horses, and hide by them or under them till the Boers muster?”

“But suppose the sentry takes it into his head to come and examine the wagon, and gives the alarm?”

“Oh, don’t suppose anything!” said Ingleborough impatiently. “We must chance a good deal and leave the rest to luck.”

West nodded, and fixed his eyes upon the wagon he had previously singled out, noticing that the Boers who occupied it were lying right beneath, sleeping, each with a rolled-up blanket for a rug.

A little later he saw a big heavy-looking Kaffir come up, look underneath at the sleepers, and then go off for a short distance, to lie down upon his chest, doubling his arms before him so as to make a resting-place for his forehead, and lying so perfectly motionless that it became evident that he also was asleep.

The evening was closing in fast now, and the men began to move about more as if making preparations for some excursion which they had in view.

“That looks well!” said Ingleborough. “There’s going to be some movement to-night. All was so still half-an-hour ago that I began to think we should have to put off our attempt.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” said West. “We *must* go!”

Further conversation was checked by the coming of the sentry to look in upon them, scowling heavily before he slouched away.

Ten minutes or so later the darkness began to fall, increasing so fast that within half-an-hour the laager would have been quite black if it had not been for a lantern inside a wagon here and there; but, in spite of the darkness, the camp began to grow more animated, a buzz of conversation seeming to rise from the wagons like the busy hum of the insects outside.

All at once, as Ingleborough was going to draw his companion's attention to this fact, he felt a hand steal along his arm to grip his hand. Then it was withdrawn, a very faint rustling followed, and the listener felt that he was alone.

"Good luck go with him!" he muttered. "I wonder whether he'll succeed?"

Leaning a little forward, he seemed to strain his ears to listen, though he felt that this was absurd, till all at once it struck him that he heard the soft sound of stealthy steps approaching from the other end of the wagon, and, creeping towards the sounds, he felt more than heard two men approaching, and as he got his head over the wagon-box he heard a whisper.

"Anson and the sentry!" he said to himself. "The spy, come to find out whether we're safe. Yes, that was Anson's whisper! Then we're done if he brings a lantern and finds me alone."

He paused for a moment or two, asking himself what he should do; and then the idea came.

Subsiding into a reclining position, he suddenly gave his thigh a sharp slap and started as if the blow had roused him up.

"Don't go to sleep, stupid!" he said aloud. "One can't sleep all these awful long nights! Oh dear me, this is precious dull work. I wish we had a lantern and a box of dominoes! I wonder whether there is a box in the laager?"

"Bother!" he said, in a low smothered tone, with his hands covering his face. "I wish you wouldn't! I was dreaming about old Anson and that he'd got ten thousand pounds' worth of diamonds in a bag aboard his wagon."

"Like enough!" continued Ingleborough, in his natural voice. "Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed. "I should like to serve the beggar out!"

"How?" he said, in the smothered sleepy voice.

"How? I'll tell you how it might be done if he had got them. Find out where his wagon is in the laager, and then wait till the sentry's asleep, and crawl

out of this thing, and nobble the lot."

"Rubbish!"

"Not it! We could get them easily enough and bring them back here. Nobody would suspect us! But there would be no getting them away! I say, are you asleep again?"

"No," said West quietly. "What's the matter with you? Are you talking in your sleep? I was afraid to come in, thinking someone was with—"

He got no farther, for Ingleborough clapped a hand over his mouth and continued.

"Heigho! What bosh one does talk! I wish there wasn't a blessed diamond in the world!"

He removed his hand, and feeling that there was some reason for all this, West said quietly: "Why?"

"Why? See what a lot of trouble they cause! This fighting is as much about the diamond-fields as anything, and— Hullo! how you startled me?"

It was quite true: he was horribly startled, feeling that their plan was spoiled, for there was a faint sound at the end of the wagon and the door of a lantern was suddenly opened, throwing the light within, and giving the prisoners a glance of the sentry's and Anson's faces looking in.

"All right?" said the sentry, in his own tongue.

"Oh yes, all right!" replied Ingleborough; "but look here: you might as well leave us that lantern! We won't set fire to the bed-curtains, I promise you!"

"No," said the Boer, and with a chuckle he closed the door of the lantern and walked whistling away to his companion.

"Anson!" said West, with his lips close to Ingleborough's ear.

"Yes: the fox! How you startled me! I didn't hear you come! I was keeping

up a sham conversation, for they were stealing down upon us to catch us on the hop! You failed, then, or were you obliged to turn back?”

“Neither: I succeeded!”

“What? You got the rifles?”

“Yes.”

“Then they must have seen them when the light was thrown in!”

“No,” said West quietly; “they are outside, leaning against the near hind wheel.”

“West, lad, this seems too good to be true. How did you manage?”

“Easily enough. I had marked down one wagon—the one I pointed out to you while it was light—and as soon as I dropped down from here I went on my hands and knees to crawl towards it. You know what a short distance it was, and by going very slowly I passed two others where the Boers were sitting outside talking. This was easy enough, for they were so much interested in their conversation that they took no notice of any noise I made.”

“And they couldn’t see you?”

“I couldn’t see them,” replied West; “so, of course, they did not see me.”

“Go on.”

“I did,” said West, “and then I thought it was all over, for the next wagon faced in another direction, and I saw what I had not seen before—a lantern was hanging in front over the driver’s box, and it sent a dull path of light forward on the ground, and I stopped, for I had to cross that path, and I felt that I must be seen.”

“Tut-tut-tut!” clicked Ingleborough.

“But after a few moments I recollected how much my drab brown jacket was like the soil, and I determined to risk it.”

“And crawled on?”

“Yes, but not on my hands and knees. I lay flat on my chest and worked myself along upon my hands and toes. It was only about a dozen yards where it was light, but it seemed like a mile.”

“Never mind that!” said Ingleborough impatiently. “You did it unheard?”

“Yes; but a man sitting in the wagon suddenly moved when I was half across, and I was about to spring up, thinking that he was searching for his rifle.”

“Phew!” whistled Ingleborough softly.

“It was well I did not; for directly after, to save getting up and opening his lantern, the Boer struck a match, and as I lay perfectly still, fully expecting to be shot, the whole place seemed to be lit up, and instead of hearing a rifle cocked I smelt a whiff of strong coarse tobacco, and I felt that I was safe.”

“Go on and get it over!” whispered Ingleborough. “You are making my hands feel wet.”

“I lay some time before I dared to move.”

“That you didn’t, for you weren’t gone long.”

“Well, it seemed an hour to me: and then I crept on and out of the light into the black darkness again, rose to my hands and knees, wondering whether I was going right, and the next minute my hand rubbed softly against a wagon-wheel, and I knew I was right.”

“Bravo!” whispered Ingleborough.

“I rose up directly, and began to feel about carefully for the tilt, and once more my heart seemed to rise to my mouth, for from under the wagon there came a dull deep snoring, and I felt it was impossible to do more for fear of being heard.”

“But you made a dash for it?”

“No: I waited to get my breath, for I was just as if I had been running. But as soon as I could I went on feeling along the edge of the tilt, and then my heart gave a jump, for my hand touched the barrel of a rifle and directly after that of another.”

“Hurrah!” panted out Ingleborough, and West went on.

“I began to draw the first towards me, but, as soon as I did, to my horror the other began to move, and I felt that if I kept on the second one would fall and wake the sleeping Boers. So I reached up with my other hand, got well hold, and drew both together. But it was terrible work, for they would not come readily, because the bandoliers were hanging to them, and as I pulled I fully expected that something would catch and discharge one of the pieces, to alarm the whole laager for certain, even if it did not kill me. But by lifting and easing and turning the rifles over I at last got the two pieces nearly out, when they suddenly seemed to be held fast, and I stood there gradually getting drenched with perspiration.”

“Why, the edge of the tilt must have caught them!” said Ingleborough excitedly.

“Yes, that’s what I found to be the case, and by turning them over again they came free, and I was standing by the wheel with what we wanted.”

“Hah!” sighed Ingleborough.

“But even then I had a chill, for the snoring ceased and the sleeper began to mutter, taking all the strength out of me, till I felt that even if he or they beneath the wagon should rouse up I could escape through the darkness if I was quick.”

“So you slung the rifles and bandoliers over your shoulders, went down on your hands and knees, and crept back?”

“No, I did not. I felt that there was not time, and that I had better trust to the darkness to escape, so I just shouldered the pieces and stepped out boldly walking across the broad path of light.”

“Good; but you should have struck off to your right, so as to get where it would be more feeble.”

“I thought of that,” said West quickly; “but I dared not, for fear of missing our wagon. So I walked boldly on, and almost ran against a Boer.”

“Tut-tut-tut! Did he stop you?”

“No: he just said: ‘Mind where you are coming!’ and passed on.”

“Well?” said Ingleborough.

“That’s all. I marched along to the wagon here and stood the rifles up before venturing to get in, for I fancied that you were talking in your sleep and would bring the sentry upon us. There, I’ve got the arms, and I don’t want such another job as that.”

“Pooh! Nonsense, lad! The game has only just begun! You ought to feel encouraged, for you have learned and taught me how easy the rest of our job will be! Just a little cool pluck, and we shall succeed!”

“Very well!” said West. “I’m ready! What next?”

“We must lie down and wait till we hear the commando on the stir, and then—”

“Yes,” said West softly; “and then?”

“Let’s wait and see!”

Chapter Twenty One.

Everything comes to the man who waits.

What seemed like a couple of the weariest hours they had ever passed went slowly by, with everything quite still in the laager; and at last West, who was lying on his back, side by side with his companion, whispered: “They’re not going on patrol to-night. We must creep out and escape on foot.”

“Without knowing the way through the entrance among the rocks, and

with dozens of sentries about? Can’t be done!”

“Pst!” whispered West, for his quick hearing had detected the approach of someone, and directly after a light was flashed in under the tilt, a little whispering followed after the dull rays were shut off, and once more there was silence.

The pair lay a good five minutes without attempting to move or speak, and then West whispered:

“Two sentries.”

“No: one and Fathead.”

“How do you know? I daren’t look, for fear they should see the gleam of my eyes.”

“I could smell him.”

“Scented—out here?”

“Yes; I believe he’d put some scent on his handkerchief and some pomatum on his hair even if he were going to be shot.”

“Hist! Listen,” said West quickly; “they’re on the stir.”

Ingleborough started up, for a voice was heard giving an order, and it was as if a stick had suddenly been thrust into a beehive and stirred round.

“Right!” said Ingleborough, in a low tone. “Now’s our time! Take a long deep breath, and let’s make the plunge. It will be all right if you keep close to me!”

West instinctively drew a long breath without thinking of his companion’s advice, for it was to him like a reflection of old boyish days when he summoned up his courage to take a plunge into deep water while wanting faith in his powers as a swimmer. But it was only the making of the plunge.

Following Ingleborough, he dropped off the end of the wagon, boldly led

him to the rifles, and together in the darkness they slipped on the bandoliers, two each, crossbelt-fashion, slung their rifles behind, put on their broad felt hats well down over their eyes, and then, imitating the Boer's heavy slouching walk, they hurried on through the laager in the direction of the horses.

It was, if possible, darker than ever, and they passed several Boers, quite half of whom were leading horses, and one of them startled and encouraged them by growling out in Dutch: "Now then—look sharp, my lads!"

"We will!" whispered Ingleborough, as soon as they had passed on; "but oh, if the ponies are gone!"

In another minute they knew that they were still safely tethered as they had seen them last, while a little search at the end of the empty wagon brought busy hands in contact with their saddles and bridles.

"Oh, it's mere child's play!" whispered Ingleborough, as they hurried back to the ponies, which recognised their voices and readily yielded to being petted, standing firm while the saddles were clapped on and they were girthed.

"Ready?" said West.

"Yes. Shall we lead them to where the muster is being made?"

"No; let's mount and ride boldly up!" said West.

The next minute they were in the saddle, and, stirred by the natural instinct to join a gathering of their own kind, both ponies neighed and ambled towards the spot where about fifty men were collected, some few mounted, others holding their bridles ready for the order to start.

There was a startler for West, though, just as they were riding towards the gathering patrol, one which communicated itself to Ingleborough, for all at once out of the darkness on their left a voice exclaimed: "Here, Piet, have you moved my rifle?"

"No," came back.

Then after a pause: “Here, what does this mean? Mine’s not where I left it! Come, no nonsense! We may want them at any time! You shouldn’t play tricks like this; it might mean a man’s life!”

The intending fugitives heard no more, their horses hurrying them from the spot, expecting to hear an alarm raised at any moment; but this did not occur.

It was too dark for the recognition of faces, and the men were for the most part sleepy and out of humour at being roused up, so that they were very silent, thinking more of themselves than of their fellows.

There was one trifling episode, though, which was startling for the moment, for West’s pony, being skittish after days of inaction, began to make feints of biting its nearest neighbour, with the result that the latter’s rider struck at it fiercely and rapped out an angry oath on two in company with an enquiry delivered in a fierce tone as to who the something or another West was that he could not keep his pony still.

Fortunately, and setting aside all necessity for a reply, a hoarse order was given, causing a little confusion, as every dismounted man climbed into his saddle, and the next moment there was a second order to advance, when the leading couple went forward and the rest followed, dropping naturally into pairs, fortunately without West and his companion being separated.

Then began the loud clattering of hoofs upon the stony way, while they wound in and out amongst ponderous blocks of granite and ironstone, trusting to the leading horses, whose riders were warned of danger in the darkness by the sentries stationed here and there.

Before they were half-way clear from the rocks of the kopje, both West and Ingleborough were fully convinced that to have attempted to escape on foot in the darkness must have resulted in failure, while minute by minute their confidence increased in the ultimate result of their ruse, for it was evident that the couple of Boers next to them in front and in rear could have no more idea of who they were than they could gain of their neighbours.

For every man’s time was fully taken up in providing for his own and his

mount's safety—much more in seeking his own, for the sure-footed ponies were pretty well accustomed to looking after themselves in patches of country such as in their own half-wild state they were accustomed to seek for the sake of the lush growth to be found bordering upon the sources of the streams.

There was not much conversation going on, only the exchange of a few hoarse grunts from time to time, sufficient, however, to encourage the two prisoners to think that they might venture upon an observation or two in Boer-Dutch, both imitating their captors' tones and roughness as far as they could. But they did not venture upon much, and carefully avoided whispers as being likely to excite suspicion.

"Have you any plans as to the next start?" said West.

"Only that we should go off north-west as soon as we are well on the open veldt, and gallop as hard as we can go."

"Which is north-west?"

"Hang me if I have the slightest idea! Have you?"

"No. But it does not matter. Let's get clear away if we can, and shape our course afterwards when the sun rises."

"Capital plan! Anything more?"

"I've been thinking," answered West, "that if we turn off suddenly together the whole troop will go in pursuit at once, and then it will be the race to the swiftest."

"Of course! It always is!"

"Oh no," said West drily; "not always: the most cunning generally wins."

"Very well, then we shall win, for we are more cunning than these dunder-headed Boers."

They rode on in silence after this for a few minutes, gradually feeling that they were on level ground, over which the ponies ambled easily enough;

but they could not see thirty yards in any direction.

“Look here,” said Ingleborough gruffly: “you’ve some dodge up your sleeve! What is it?”

“Only this,” replied West; “I’ve been thinking that if we can get a hundred yards’ clear start, and then strike off to right or left, we can laugh at pursuit, for they will have lost sight of us and will not know which way to pursue.”

“Yes, that’s right enough, but how are you going to get your hundred yards’ start?”

“I’ll tell you how I think it can be done,” and, bending over towards his companion, West mumbled out a few words in the darkness and Ingleborough listened and uttered a low grunt as soon as his friend had finished.

Then there was utter silence, broken only by the dull clattering sound of the horses’ hoofs upon the soft dusty earth, West listening the while in the black darkness till he heard Ingleborough upon his left make a rustling noise caused by the bringing round and unslinging of his rifle, followed by the loading and then the softly cocking of the piece.

“Ready?” said Ingleborough, at last.

“Yes,” was the reply.

“Then one—two—three—and away!” said Ingleborough softly.

At the first word West began to bear upon his horse’s rein, drawing its head round to the right, and at the last he drove his heels sharply into the pony’s flanks and wrenched its head round so suddenly that the startled little beast made a tremendous bound off towards the open veldt, its sudden action having a stunning and confusing effect upon the line of Boers.

“Hi! stop!” roared Ingleborough directly, shouting in the Boer-Dutch tongue, while as West tore on his companion stood up in his stirrups, fired two shots after him in succession, and then with another shout he

set spurs to his pony and dashed off as fast as his mount would go.

The fugitives plunged one after the other into the darkness on the little column's flank, and the burghers saw them for a few moments ere they disappeared and their ponies' hoofs began to sound dull before they recovered from the stupor of astonishment the suddenness of the incident had caused.

Then a voice shouted fiercely: "A deserter! Fire and bring him down!"

"No: stop!" shouted the leader, in a stentorian voice. "Do you want to shoot your faithful brother?"

There was a murmur of agreement at this, and the rustle and rattle of rifles being unslung stopped at once.

"Who is the burgher who followed the traitor?" continued the leader.

There was no reply, only a low muttering of voices as the Boers questioned one another.

"Wait," continued the officer in command. "I daresay our brother has wounded him and will bring him back in a few minutes."

The Boers waited with their little force drawn up in line and facing the black far-stretching veldt, every man wondering which two of their party had been traitor and pursuer, and naturally waited in vain.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Query: Freedom?

The dash for liberty had been well carried out, West getting his sturdy pony into a swinging gallop before he had gone far, and keeping it up straight away till he could hear Ingleborough's shout in close pursuit, when he drew rein a little, till in its efforts to rejoin its companion the second pony raced up alongside.

"Bravo, West, lad!" panted Ingleborough, in a low tone that sounded terribly loud in their ears, which magnified everything in their excitement. "It's a pity you are not in the regulars!"

"Why?"

"You'd soon be a general!"

"Rubbish!" said West shortly. "Don't talk or they'll be on us! Can you hear them coming?"

"No; and I don't believe they will come! They'll leave it to me to catch you. I say, I didn't kill you when I fired, did I?"

"No," said West, with a little laugh, "but you made me jump each time! The sensation was rather queer."

"I took aim at an angle of forty-five degrees with the horizon or thereabouts, to be exact," said Ingleborough pedantically; "and those two, my first shots with a Mauser rifle, no doubt have travelled a couple of miles at what they call a high trajectory. But what glorious luck!"

"Yes; I never dared to hope that the plan would succeed so well."

"Talk about humbugging anyone—why, it was splendid!"

"But oughtn't we to go off at right angles now?" said West anxiously, as he turned himself in his saddle and listened.

“Quite time enough to do that when we hear them tearing along in full pursuit, and that will not be to-night.”

“Think not?”

“I feel sure of it, lad! Of course they can’t hatch it out in their thick skulls that their two prisoners were the actors in this little drama: they can’t know till they get back that we have escaped.”

“Of course not.”

“And you may depend upon it that they’ll stand fast for about a quarter of an hour waiting for me to come back, either with my prisoner alive or with his scalp—I mean his rifle, ammunition, and pony.”

“And when they find that you don’t come back?” said West, laughing to himself.

“Then they’ll say that you’ve taken my scalp and gone on home with it: think it is just the fortune of war, and promise themselves that they’ll ride out by daylight to save my body from the Aasvogels and bury it out of sight.”

“And by degrees they will put that and that together,” said West, “and find that they have been thoroughly tricked.”

“Yes, and poor Anson will distil pearly tears from those beautiful eyes of his, and we shall not be there to see them rolling down his fat cheeks. West, lad, I never yet wanted to kill a man.”

“Of course not, and you don’t now!”

“That’s quite correct, lad; but I should like to be a grand inquisitor sitting on Master Anson for his renegade ways and superintending in the torture-chamber. My word, shouldn’t he have the question of the water; no, the rack; or better still, the extraction of his nails. Stop a minute: I think hanging from the ceiling by his wrists with a weight attached to his ankles, and a grand finish-off with the question of fire would be more fitting. Bless him for a walking tallow sausage, wouldn’t he burn!”

“Ugh! Don’t be such a savage!” cried West angrily. “You wouldn’t do anything of the kind. I should be far more hard-hearted and cruel than you’d be, for I would have him tied up to the wheel of a wagon and set a Kaffir to flog him with a sjambok on his bare back.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Ingleborough sharply.

“What’s the matter?”

“And I’ve come away without having the oily rascal stripped of his plunder.”

“What! His diamonds?”

“Yes. I know he has a regular pile hidden in that wagon of his, and, what’s more, I know where to look and find them.”

“Where?”

“Never you mind till the time comes! I have a sort of prescient idea that some day we shall face that fellow again with the circumstances reversed; and then I’m going to have his loot cleared out.”

And this and much more as the fugitives cantered easily along through the darkness, giving their ponies their heads and letting them increase the distance more and more, till all at once West broke the silence by exclaiming: “I say, Ingle, is it really true?”

“Is what really true—that Master Anson’s a fat beast?”

“No, no; that we have escaped and are riding away at full liberty to go where we please? It seems to me like a dream, and that in the morning we shall awake and find ourselves once again in that dreary wagon.”

“Partly true, partly imaginary,” said Ingleborough bluntly.

“What do you mean?” said West, in a startled tone.

“It’s true that we’ve made a jolly clever escape, thanks to you; but it isn’t true that we’re at liberty to go where we like.”

“Why not?” said West wonderingly.

“Because you’ve got that despatch in your jacket somewhere, I hope.”

“Yes,” said West, after running his hand down a seam. “It’s safe enough!”

“Well, that despatch says we must go to Mafeking; so we’re prisoners to duty still.”

“Of course!” said West cheerily. “But look here: it’s of no use to tire our ponies. We’re far enough off now to let them walk, or dismount and let them graze till we know which way to steer.”

“It’s all right; keep on, lad! We’re steering as straight as if we had a compass. I believe the ponies know where we want to go, and took the right line at once.”

“Nonsense! You don’t believe anything of the kind. What makes you think we’re going in the right direction?”

“Because the clouds yonder thinned out a bit half-an-hour ago, and I saw three dim stars in a sort of arch, and continuing the line there was another brighter one just in the place where it ought to be. I know them as well as can be of old: the big one sets just in the north-west.”

“Are you sure of that?” cried West eagerly.

“As sure as that I bore off a little to the right as soon as I saw that star, so as to turn more to the north and straight for Mafeking. I don’t guarantee that we are keeping straight for it now the stars are shut out; but we shall know as soon as it’s day by the compass.”

“Why don’t we strike a light and examine it now?” said West eagerly.

“Because we haven’t a match!” replied Ingleborough. “Didn’t our sturdy honest captors take everything away but my knife, which was luckily in my inner belt along with my money?”

“To be sure!” sighed West.

“And if we had matches we dare not strike them for fear of the light being seen by one of the Boer patrols.”

“Yes,” said West, with another sigh. “I suppose they are everywhere now!”

At that moment the ponies stopped short, spun round, almost unseating their riders, and went off at full speed back along the way they had come; and it was some minutes before they could be checked and soothed and patted back into a walk.

“The country isn’t quite civilised yet,” said West; “fancy lions being so near the line of a railway. Hark; there he goes again!”

For once more the peculiar barking roar of a lion came from a distance, making the air seem to quiver and the ponies turn restless again and begin to snort with dread.

“Steady, boys, steady!” said Ingleborough soothingly to the two steeds. “Don’t you know that we’ve got a couple of patent foreign rifles, and that they would be more than a match for any lion that ever lived?”

“If we shot straight!” said West banteringly. “There he goes again! How near do you think that fellow is?”

“Quiet, boy!” cried Ingleborough, leaning forward and patting his pony on the neck, with satisfactory results. “How far? It’s impossible to say! I’ve heard performers who called themselves ventriloquists, but their tricks are nothing to the roaring of a lion. It’s about the most deceptive sound I know. One time it’s like thunder, and another it’s like Bottom the Weaver.”

“Like what?” cried West.

“The gentleman I named who played lion, and for fear of frightening the ladies said he would roar him as gently as a sucking dove. Now then, what’s to be done?”

“I don’t know,” said West. “We did not calculate upon having lions to act as sentries on behalf of the Boers.”

“Let’s bear off more to the north and try to outflank the great cat.”

Changing their course, they started to make a half-circle of a couple of miles’ radius, riding steadily on, but only to have their shivering mounts startled again and again till they were ready to give up in despair.

“We’d better wait till daybreak,” said West.

“There’s no occasion to,” said Ingleborough, “for there it is, coming right behind us, and we’re going too much to the west. Bear off, and let’s ride on. I don’t suppose we shall be troubled any more. What we want now is another kopje—one which hasn’t been turned into a trap.”

“There’s what we want!” said West, half-an-hour later, as one of the many clumps of rock and trees loomed up in the fast lightening front.

“Yes,” said Ingleborough sharply, “and there’s what we don’t want, far nearer to us than I like.”

“Where?” asked West sharply.

“Straight behind us!”

“Why, Ingle,” cried West, in despair, “they’ve been following us all through the night!”

“No,” said Ingleborough, shading his eyes with his hand; “that’s a different patrol, I feel sure, coming from another direction.”

“What shall we do?”

“Ride straight for that kopje; we’re between it and the patrol, and perhaps they won’t see us. If they do we must gallop away.”

“But suppose this kopje proves to be occupied?” said West. “We don’t want to be taken prisoners again.”

“That’s the truest speech you’ve made for twenty-four hours, my lad,” said Ingleborough coolly, “but, all the same, that seems to be the wisest thing to do.”

“Make for the kopje?”

“Yes, for we want water, shelter, and rest.”

“But if the Boers are there too?”

“Hang it, lad, there aren’t enough of the brutes to occupy every kopje in the country; some of them must be left for poor fellows in such a mess as we are.”

“Ride on and chance it then?”

“To be sure!” was the reply; and they went on at a steady canter straight for the clump in front, a mile or so away, turning every now and then to watch the line of horsemen which seemed to be going at right angles to their track. Just as they reached the outskirts of the eminence the leading files of the patrol bore off a little and the fugitives had the misery of seeing that the enemy they wished to avoid seemed to be aiming straight for the place they had intended for a refuge, while to have ridden out to right or left meant going full in sight of the patrol.

To make matters worse, the sun was beginning to light up the stony tops of the kopje, and in a very few minutes the lower portions would be glowing in the morning rays.

“Cheer up!” said Ingleborough; “it’s a big one! Now then, dismount and lead horses! Here’s cover enough to hide in now, and we may be able to get round to the other side without being seen.”

“And then?”

“Oh, we won’t intrude our company upon the enemy; let’s ride off as fast as we can.”

Chapter Twenty Three.

False Alarms.

The bottom and surroundings of the eminence afforded plenty of cover, and the fugitives pushed on in and out among dense patches of low growth, and, leading their sure-footed little ponies, they climbed over and around piles and masses of stone that would have been difficulties even to mules, while twice over West scaled a slope so as to carefully look down and backward at the enemy.

This he was able to do unseen, and came down again to report that the patrol was still making for the kopje as if for rest, but that their movements were too careless and deliberate for those of an enemy in pursuit.

The far side of the pile of granite and ironstone was reached in safety, placing the fugitives about a quarter of a mile from the Boers in a direct line, but quite a mile of intricate climbing if measured by the distance round; and they paused in a green patch full of refreshing beauty, being a wide ravine stretching up into the height, and with a bubbling stream of water running outward and inviting the ponies at once to take their fill.

“This settles it at once!” said Ingleborough, letting his bridle fall upon his mount’s neck.

“Yes; we can go well in yonder, leading the ponies along the bed of the stream. There is plenty of cover to hide half a regiment.”

“Of Boers,” said Ingleborough shortly. “It will not do for us.”

“Why?” said West, staring. “We can hide there till they have gone.”

“My dear boy,” said Ingleborough; “can’t you see? The beggars evidently know this place, and are making for it on account of the water. We saw none on the other side.”

“Very well,” said West sharply; “let’s ride off, and keep the hill between us and them.”

“Too late!” said Ingleborough. “This way; come on!”

For as he spoke there was the loud beating noise of many hoofs, indicating that the whole or a portion of the commando was coming at a

gallop round the opposite side of the kopje from that by which the fugitives had come; and to have started then would have meant a gallop in full sight of a large body of men ready to deliver a rifle-fire of which they would have had to run the gauntlet.

“We’re entering another trap,” said West bitterly, as they led their reluctant ponies along the bed of the stream, fortunately for them too stony for any discoloration to be borne down to show the keen-eyed Boers that someone had passed that way, and at the same time yielding no impress of the footprints of man or beast.

As far as the fugitives could see, the ravine went in a devious course a couple of hundred yards into the eminence, but, as it proved, nearly across to the other side. It was darkened by overhanging trees and creepers, which found a hold in every ledge or crack of the almost perpendicular sides, and grew darker and darker at every score of yards; but the echoing rocks gave them full notice of what was going on near the entrance, the voices of the Boers and the splashing noise of their horses’ feet coming with many repetitions to drown any sound made by their own.

“It isn’t a bad place!” said Ingleborough, as they hurried on, with the ravine growing more narrow and the sides coming more sharply down into the water. “It strikes me that we shall find the water comes out of some cave.”

Five minutes later Ingleborough proved to be quite correct, for they paused at a rugged archway between piled-up fern-hung blocks, out of which the water rushed in a fairly large volume, but not knee-deep; and, upon leaving his horse with his comrade and boldly wading in, West found that the cave expanded as soon as the entrance was passed, so that the spring ran outward along a narrow stony bed, and on either side there was a bed of sand of considerable width.

“Come along!” said West. “The water gets shallower, and there is a dry place on either side.”

Ingleborough waded in at once, but unfortunately the ponies shrank from following, and hung back from the reins, one of them uttering a loud

snort, which was repeated from the interior so loudly that the second animal reared up wildly and endeavoured to break away.

West dashed back though directly and relieved his companion of one of the refractory beasts, when by means of a good deal of coaxing and patting they were finally got along for some yards and out onto the sandy side, where they whinnied out their satisfaction and recovered their confidence sufficiently to step towards the running waters and resume their interrupted drink.

“Rifles!” said Ingleborough shortly, when West unslung his and stood ready, following his companion’s example as he stood in the darkness with his piece pointing out at the bright stream with its mossy and fern-hung framing.

“Did you hear anyone coming?” whispered West.

“No, but they must have heard our ponies and be coming on,” was the reply.

“Let them come; we can keep the whole gang at bay from here!”

But five minutes’ watching and listening proved that they had not been heard, for the Boers were too busy watering their horses, the voices of the men and the splashings and tramplings of the beasts coming in reverberations right along the natural speaking-tube, to strike clearly upon the listeners’ ears.

Three several times the fugitives stood on guard with rifles cocked, ready to make a determined effort to defend their post of vantage, for the voices came nearer and nearer, and splashing sounds indicated movements out towards the mouth of the ravine; but just when their nerves were strained to the utmost, and they watched with starting eyes a corner round which the enemy would have to turn to bring them within range, the talking and splashing died out, and they simultaneously uttered a sigh of relief.

“I couldn’t bear much of this, Ingle,” said West, at last. “I half think that I would rather have them come on so that we could get into the excitement of a fight.”

“I don’t half think so, lad; I do quite,” replied Ingleborough.

“But you don’t want to fight?”

“Of course not; I don’t want to feel that I’ve killed anybody; but at the same time I’d rather kill several Boers than they should kill me. However, I hope they will not attack us, for if they do I mean to shoot as straight as I can and as often as is necessary. What do you say?”

West was silent for a few moments, during which he seemed to be thinking out the position. At last he spoke: “I have never given the Boers any reason for trying to destroy my life, my only crime being that I am English. So, as life is very sweet and I want to live as long as I can, I shall do as you do till they get disheartened, for I don’t see how they can get at us, and—”

“Here, quick, lad!” whispered Ingleborough, swinging round. “We’re attacked from behind!”

West followed his example, feeling fully convinced that the Boers had after all seen them seek refuge in the cavern, and had taken advantage of their knowledge of the place to creep through some tunnel which led in from the other side, for there was a strange scuffling and rustling sound a little way in, where it was quite dark. With rifles pointed towards the spot and with fingers on triggers, the two friends waited anxiously for some further development, so as to avoid firing blindly into the cavern without injury to the enemy while leaving themselves unloaded when their foes rushed on.

“Can’t be Boers!” said Ingleborough, at the end of a minute, during which the noise went on; “it’s wild beasts of some kind.”

“Lions,” suggested West.

“Oh no; they’d go about as softly as cats! More like a pack of hyaenas trying to get up their courage for a charge!”

“If we fired and stood on one side they’d rush out!” replied West.

“Yes,” said Ingleborough grimly; “and the Boers would rush in to see what

was the matter. That wouldn't do, for it's evident that they don't know we're here."

"But we must do something, or they'll injure the horses! Why!" cried West excitedly; "it must be that they've pulled the poor beasts down and are devouring them."

"Without our little Basutos making a kick for life? Nonsense! They'd squeal and kick and rush out. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

To West's astonishment his companion burst into a prolonged fit of gentle laughter.

"Here, come along!" he said. "Of all the larky beggars! Here, you two ruffians, stow that, or you'll smash up those saddles!"

Ingleborough dashed in, followed at once by West, and as they got in further from the cave's mouth they dimly saw their mounts spring up from having a good roll and wriggle upon the soft dry sand to rest their spines and get rid of the larvae of some worrying pernicious horse-fly.

The moment the two ponies were on all-fours they gave themselves a vigorous shake, and then whinnied softly and advanced to their riders with out-stretched necks, expectant of a piece of bread or some other delicacy with which they had been petted from time to time.

"Why, you larky little rascals!" cried Ingleborough, patting the two beasts affectionately; "what do you mean by frightening us out of our seven senses? I mean frightening me, for you weren't scared a bit—eh, West?"

"Frightened? It was horrible! I can understand now why the Boers can't bear being attacked from behind!"

"Of course! I say, though, no wonder children are afraid of being in the dark." He turned to the ponies, and said: "Look here, my lads, I suppose you don't understand me, but if you could take my advice you'd lie down to have a good rest. It would do you both good, and if the firing did begin you'd escape being hit."

To this one of the ponies whinnied softly, and then moved gently to its

companion’s side, head to tail, bared its big teeth as if to bite, and began to draw them along the lower part of the other’s spine, beginning at the root of the tail and rasping away right up to the saddle, while the operatee stretched out its neck and set to work in the same way upon the operator, upon the give-and-take principle, both animals grunting softly and uttering low sounds that could only be compared to bleats or purrs.

“They say there’s nothing so pleasant in life as scratching where you itch,” said West, laughing. “My word! They do seem to enjoy it.”

“Poor beggars, yes!” replied Ingleborough. “I believe there’s no country in the world where animals are more tortured by flies than in Africa. The wretched insects plunge in that sharp instrument of theirs, pierce the skin, and leave an egg underneath; the warmth of the body hatches it into what we fishing boys called a gentle, and that white maggot goes on eating and growing under the poor animal’s coat, living on hot meat always till it is full-grown, when its skin dries up and turns reddish-brown, and it lies still for a bit, before changing into a fly, which escapes from the hole in the skin it has eaten and flits away to go and torture more animals.”

“And not only horses, but other animals!” said West quietly.

“Horses only? Oh no; the bullocks get them terribly, and the various kinds of antelopes as well. I’ve seen skins taken off blesboks and wildebeestes full of holes. And there you are, my lad; that’s a lecture on natural history.”

“Given in the queerest place and at the strangest time a lecture was ever given anywhere,” said West.

“It is very horrible, though, for the animals to be tortured so!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough thoughtfully; “but the flies must enjoy themselves wonderfully. They must have what people in England call a high old time, and—eh? What’s the matter?”

“Be ready!” whispered West. “Someone coming; there’s no mistake now!”

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Real Alarm.

Ingleborough drew in his breath with a hiss, and once more stood on his guard with his comrade right in the darkness, and in front of the two ponies, where a good view of the stream outside and the corner rock fringed with ferns could be obtained.

For voices could be heard as of two men talking together, while plash, plash, plash their footsteps in the water echoed for some moments from the rocky sides of the chasm, before they came leisurely into sight round the corner and stood knee-deep looking straight into the cave, little thinking of the peril in which they were, for a couple of rifles covered them, and the slightest pressure upon the triggers would have sent the long thin bullets upon their errand to pierce the Boers through and through.

But no pressure came, those within the cavern seeing clearly enough from the men's careless manner that they felt perfectly safe and were upon no unusual errand.

They were roughly enough clad, and their outer garments showed that they had been slept in for some time and exposed to all kinds of weather; but there was something about their mien, and more in the words they let fall, which showed them to belong to a superior type of Boer.

"Yes, there it is," said one of the two in Boer-Dutch, "just as it was ten years ago when I was here on a hunting trip. The source is perennial, and beautiful water. That's why I wanted Dietz to come out of our way."

"Does it go in far?"

"About a hundred yards, and there the water suddenly gushes out of the floor; but there are some nasty holes about, plunging down no one knows how deep, and I shouldn't like to venture in without a light."

"Why didn't we bring a lantern?"

“Because we don’t want to go burrowing into the kopje.”

“Speak for yourself. I do!” said the second man. “Here, I’ve got plenty of matches—come along.”

“No, thank you,” said the first. “One never knows what may be in a place like that.”

West pinched his companion’s arm.

“What is likely to be there?”

“Who can tell? A lioness and her full-grown cubs, perhaps, or a pack of jackals! Worse still, snakes or some of the wandering bushmen with bows and poisoned arrows.”

“Hardly likely!” said the second Boer.

“I think very likely,” said the first speaker, peering so steadfastly into the cavern that for a few moments West felt certain that they were seen. “One of the Kaffir tribes would not enter that place to save their lives.”

“Why?”

“Because they believe that a great water demon hides in the spring who rises up and seizes anyone who approaches, drags him down, and devours him.”

“All of which must be perfectly true!” answered the other Boer, with a sneer. “Of course you are a believer?”

“I’m a full believer in its being dangerous to go into caves without proper lights,” said the first speaker coldly, “and I think we are undergoing risks enough every day from the rooineks’ rifles and their lancers’ spears, without chancing a fall down some horrible pit.”

“Where there is a water demon!” said his companion, with another sneer.

“Just for the sake of gratifying a little idle curiosity.”

“Oh, very well then! I don’t like to come to such a natural curiosity without exploring; so here goes alone.”

The next moment the first speaker had stretched out his hand and barred his companion’s way with his rifle.

“What do you mean by that?” cried the Boer.

“To stop you going.”

“What!” cried the other. “I shall go if I please!”

“No!” said the first speaker sternly. “I order you not!”

“You—you order me?” cried the other wrathfully.

“Yes; recollect that you are a soldier for the time being, and under my command. I order you not to go, for we have too much need of all our brave burghers to defend the country to let any man risk his life in a foolhardy adventure.”

“Pish!”

“Silence!” said the other sternly. “I am going back. Had I known of this, I would not have let you come!”

“Look here,” said the other insolently, “we are not on duty now, and once for all I tell you that while I serve I am not going to put up with bullying from any man who is a step above me in the ranks.”

The first speaker looked at him sternly, and Ingleborough placed his lips close to West’s ear.

“Look here,” said Ingleborough, “if we shoot, both take aim at that obstinate brute, and give the other a chance to run for his life!”

A nod was the only answer, as both listened to what was said further.

“You fellows, because you get made field-cornets by a bit of luck, don’t know how to contain yourselves, and—”

“Back to your horse!” said the first speaker, the veins in whose forehead stood out in a network beneath his flap-brimmed hat, while his voice sounded full of suppressed fury.

“Back yourself!” cried the other. “I’ll obey your orders in the field, but we of the Free State are getting tired of the overbearing ways of you men of the Transvaal. Put down your rifle, sir! By all that’s holy, if you hold it towards me in that threatening way, I’ll send a Mauser bullet through you. If I die for it, I will.”

At that moment, just as there seemed to be every possibility of a deadly encounter between the two men, there was a loud hail from beyond the rock, and, as it was not replied to, another cry was heard, in company with loud echoing splashes in the water, and half-a-dozen Boers waded into sight, evidently in a high state of excitement.

“Hullo there!” shouted the foremost, “didn’t you hear us call? We began to think you had fallen into an ambush! Quick, back with you: there’s a patrol of the rooineks out yonder coming this way, the mounted men with the spiked poles.”

“Many or few?” said the man addressed as the field-cornet, and, apparently forgetting his anger in the excitement, he began to hurry away from the cavern mouth, talking loudly the while. “I’ll see! If they’ll come on, we’ll stay here; if not, we might try and surround them and capture the whole gang!”

The next minute the walls of the gully were echoing the hurried splashing made by the party, as the last of them turned the corner and disappeared across the veldt.

“Phew! What a pity!” said Ingleborough, taking off his hat to wipe his forehead.

“A pity!” cried West. “What: the news that some of our people are near?”

“No, no; I meant that the row came to an end. I was in hopes that we were going to have a new version of the Kilkenny cats, and two enemies of Old England were going to tear each other to pieces and leave only a tail behind.”

“Oh, be serious, Ingle!” said West excitedly. “We might venture out now.”

“Don’t be rash! We’ve got to find out what they mean to do.”

“Come along then, and let’s leave the horses where they are. We must try and climb up somewhere to see what is going on.”

“Very well, but take care! These are awfully breakneck walls to mount.”

“Yes, but it has to be done! Why not up that crack?”

West pointed to a rift half-full of wiry-looking shrubs mingled with ferns, which ran up the rocky wall of the gully diagonally.

“Think you can do it?”

“Yes, it’s easier than it looks. Let’s try!”

“Right!” said Ingleborough. “Up you go!”

West waded across to the side, slinging his rifle as he went, then pulling his hat on tightly, he reached up as high as he could, and drew himself up a foot or two. Then, carefully taking advantage of the angles and edges of projecting rocks for his feet and getting hand-hold of the tough shrubs, he was soon up twenty feet above the rushing stream.

“Come along!” he said. “It’s not bad climbing!”

“Matter of opinion,” replied Ingleborough, “but here goes!” and he began to mount, while West went on.

“Oh yes,” he said, “it’s all right! Why, it puts one in mind of the Lady—I say, lad, ugh!—that was slippy!”

“Hold on then!” cried West excitedly, for one of Ingleborough’s feet glided over the edge of a stone, which yielded, and he was left hanging by his hands, to strive to get a footing.

“Get out!” said Ingleborough, panting. “That’s better. Just as if I shouldn’t hold on! Think I wanted a cold bath?”

“You gave me quite a turn!” said West. “Will you leave it to me? I can manage it!”

“Go on, you vain young coxcomb! So can I manage it! If you don’t look out, I’ll be up first! Well, what are you stopping for?”

“Look down there!” said West.

Ingleborough held on tightly while he twisted his head to see that the two ponies had hurried out of the cave to wade to the place where they had started from, and were looking up wonderingly.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Ingleborough. “They’re afraid of being left behind! Here, you two, be off back into your stable,” he continued, getting hold of a loose piece of rock with the intention of dropping it into the water to scare the lookers-on.

“No, no, don’t do that!” said West softly. “You may scare them into cantering down into the midst of the Boers!”

“Right,” said Ingleborough, replacing the stone. “I don’t suppose they’ll mind.”

At that moment one of the ponies whinnied, and the other took up the cry of discontent.

“Quiet, will you? Look here!” said Ingleborough, speaking as if in the full belief that the two animals understood every word. “If you make that row, you’ll have the Boers down upon us, and that will mean new masters, with worse treatment than you get from us! That’s settled them,” continued Ingleborough, speaking again to his companion, and as it happened the two animals did not repeat their challenging cry, but began to nibble at the greenery overhanging the water.

Meanwhile the climbing grew more difficult as the adventurers got higher and more excited, for all at once the rapid crack-crack-crack of rifles began telling of attack and defence, and making the climbers strain every effort to get to the top, which was at last accomplished by West, who drew himself over the edge of the rocks and lay panting for a few moments before looking down.

“Can’t you manage it?” he said; for Ingleborough had come to a stand some twenty feet below.

“No!” was the reply. “My right foot has slipped into a crack here, and is wedged tight. Don’t wait for me! Go on, only let’s have all the news as soon as you can!”

West’s first idea was to lower himself down; but, feeling that one was enough to find out all they wanted, he obeyed his comrade’s orders and went on climbing upon all-fours what was now an easy slope with plenty of cover in the shape of bushes and huge blocks of stone.

A few minutes brought him to the top of the kopje, whence he had a clear view of all that was going on, while the firing was now general.

He saw at a glance that the Boers had not attempted to hold the natural stronghold, for upon discovering their numbers, the half-troop of lancers, some thirty in number, had begun to retire, and the Boers, of whom there seemed to be about a hundred and fifty, were streaming out in two directions, evidently with the intention of surrounding and taking them prisoners, both sides keeping up a steady fire the while. West stopped no longer than was necessary to satisfy himself that the Boers were getting rapidly farther and farther from the kopje, and then hurried back down the slope to the top of the gully, where, leaning over, he found Ingleborough busy at work, apparently driving his rifle-barrel down into a crevice. “Ahoy!” cried West. “Hallo there! What news, lad?”

“Small party of lancers in full retreat, and the Boers very strong in pursuit. They’re a mile away now.”

“Then we shall get no help from our people; but, if they are taking the enemy away, that’s all we want. Coming down?”

“Yes,” said West, lowering himself over the edge very cautiously, for it was terribly dangerous work, and Ingleborough shivered and hung back, watching him till his companion reached the ledge where he had been checked.

“Hah!” sighed Ingleborough; “that’s better. I’ve been wishing for the last five minutes that the stream below was ten feet deep!”

“Why?” panted West, who was breathless from his exertions.

“For you to fall into! But now help me to get my boot! I’m afraid to lever it out with my rifle-barrel, for fear of bending it.”

“Let me try!” said West, and, thrusting his arm down into the crack, he got well hold of the boot, gave it a jerk sidewise, and it was free.

“Look at that now!” said Ingleborough. “My word! it’s a fine thing to have been born clever. How did you do it?”

“Pulled it out,” replied West, smiling.

“Of course; but *I* couldn’t! It took me all my time to get it unlaced and to draw out my foot. Stuck, for it was so wet!”

In another five minutes, while the cracking of the rifle-fire was growing more distant, the boot was replaced, the dangerous descent continued, with several slips and slides, each saving his friend in turn from a bad fall, and the pair reached the water only minus a little skin, to be welcomed by their ponies, who came up to them at once, ready to be led cautiously to the entrance of the gully.

But there was no need for the extra care, inspection proving that no Boers were left behind, and that they were too far distant now to distinguish what went on at the resting-place they had left.

“Think they’ll make the lancers prisoners?” said West, after they had stood scanning the level veldt for some minutes.

“Not unless they can surround them, and I should give our cavalry credit for being too cautious to let them do that!” said Ingleborough. “Now then, what do you say for another try Mafeking-ward?”

“Forward!” was the reply, and after a glance at the compass to lay down their course, the friends mounted and, refreshed, though not much rested, they cantered off, making a bee-line almost due north, with the intention of cautiously approaching some farm on their way to purchase food.

Chapter Twenty Five.

At Tante Ann's.

It was growing dark before a suitable place presented itself, this being a typical Boer farm in a very desolate part of the veldt, the spot having been evidently chosen by its occupants on account of the tiny kopje and abundant supply of water welling out, besides being a perfect spot for the branch of farming the owner carried on, there being pen after pen of ostriches, the great foolish-looking large-eyed birds staring at the two horsemen wonderingly as they approached the door where the owner stood looking distant and glum, as he smoked his big pipe.

Yes, he said, he would sell them some provisions for themselves and corn for their horses if they had money to pay for what they wanted.

This was at once produced, and the farmer looked on after summoning a huge Kaffir to help with the horses and get out the corn; while his fat wife, after coming to the door to glare at the visitors, condescended to put on a kettle to prepare them tea, and see if there was a chicken that could be killed and broiled, and some eggs for frying.

There were several bits of consultation carried on by the husband and wife from time to time, and everything showed that the visitors were far from welcome.

"Never mind," said Ingleborough; "all we want is a good meal, and we shall be off in the morning as soon as it is light."

"That shed with the iron roof is to be our bedroom, I suppose?" said West.

"Yes, and we're lucky to get that and a few sacks."

Just then the Boer came slowly sidling up, smoking hard the while, to know if they had seen anything of the war, and he seemed deeply interested on hearing that a skirmish had been going on not so many miles from his farm.

“Why are you two not fighting?” he said suddenly.

“Because we don’t want to,” was West’s smiling reply.

“But you are Englanders?” said the Boer.

“Yes, but all Englanders don’t want to fight,” said West, while Ingleborough looked on, quite unmoved.

“Oh, don’t tell, me!” said the Boer, shaking his head. “They all want to fight and kill the Boers before robbing them of their homes and farms. Don’t tell me—I know!”

He walked away to where the Kaffir was seeing to the horses, and West noticed that he took a good deal of notice of them, glanced two or three times in the direction of his visitors, and then ran his hands down their legs in a most professional way, narrowly escaping a kick from West’s steed, before he walked thoughtfully back to his rough—looking house, into which he was careful not to allow his guests to enter.

“We’re to share the stable with the nags,” said Ingleborough; “but it doesn’t matter. Let’s go and see how they are getting on,” he continued, as the Boer disappeared indoors. “We can’t afford to have them fed on some of his lordship’s refuse. I know something of the tricks of these gentlemen of old.”

They entered the rough stable, where the big Kaffir was standing on one side and greeted them with a heavy scowl.

“Well, Jack,” said Ingleborough, “are the ponies eating their corn?”

“Yes, baas,” said the black gruffly; “eat um all fast.”

“Ah, I thought so,” said Ingleborough quietly, sniffing and blowing on the musty trash. “Do you feed your horses on stuff like this?”

He turned so sharply on the Kaffir that the man shrank as if from a blow; but his questioner smiled.

“Not your fault, I suppose?”

“Baas say, ‘Give ponies thaht,’” he replied apologetically.

“Of course, my lad,” said Ingleborough, drawing out a shilling and slipping it into the black’s hand.

“Now you get some of the best corn, and see that the horses eat it. You understand?”

“Yes, baas,” said the man, with a sharp click, as his eyes glistened and he showed his white teeth in a satisfied grin. “Soon my baas go away, give them good to eat.”

“Is your baas going away?”

“Iss; saddle pony; go away.”

As the black spoke he pointed to the farther end of the long mud-walled shed, where another pony was tied up.

Just then the shrill voice of the Boer vrouw was heard calling, and the Kaffir gave a shout in reply.

“Tant’ Ann want um,” he said, and he ran out, joined the lady at the door, and was dismissed to get some fuel from a heap, while the farmer came out, smoking away, and Ingleborough left the shed with West as if to join him.

“Are you going to give him your opinion?” said West.

“No: we can’t afford to quarrel. The Kaffir will take care of our nags now, and get another tip for his pains.”

The next minute they were close up to their host, who had evidently been thinking over the words which had last been exchanged.

“You Englanders,” he said, “think you are very clever; but the Boers beat you before, and they’re going to beat you more this time, and drive you all into the sea.”

“Very well!” said West, smiling. “I hope they’ll give us time to get into the

ships.”

“Perhaps!” said the Boer, smoking more rapidly in his excitement. “But it’s all going to be Dutch now! No more English!”

“All right,” said Ingleborough; “but I want my supper very badly.”

“Want to eat? Yes; come in! The vrouw says it is nearly ready.”

“That’s right; then let’s have it.”

“You can come in the house,” continued the farmer, and Ingleborough raised his eyebrows a little in surprise.

But a greater surprise awaited the pair on entering the mud-floored room to find quite a decent meal awaiting them on the table, and their sour-looking heavy hostess ready to wait on them with a kind of surly civility.

The pair were too hungry to think of anything then but appeasing their appetite, and they made a good meal, their host making no scruple about bringing a stool to the table and taking a larger share than either.

He said little, but his little keen eyes examined everything in connection with his visitors’ costume, paying most heed to their weapons, while his wife saw to the wants of all from time to time, retiring at intervals to a second room which led out of the first and seemed to have been added quite lately.

“You’ll want to sleep soon?” said the farmer inquiringly, when the meal was ended.

“Yes, the sooner the better,” said Ingleborough, rising; an example followed by West; “and we shall be off in the morning early. We’ll take a couple of these cakes.”

The Boer nodded.

“Shall I sell you some biltong?” he said.

“Yes, certainly.”

“I will have it ready. Where are you going now?”

“To look at the ponies.”

“Oh, they are all well. My Kaffir has seen to them.”

“But I suppose we are to sleep out there?” said Ingleborough.

“No,” said the Boer; “you can sleep there,” and he pointed to a rough-looking bed in one corner of the room. “My Kaffir sleeps with the horses. My vrouw and I sleep in the other room.”

“Then as soon as we can we should like to turn this dining-room into our bedroom,” said Ingleborough.

“But we’ll look at our ponies first.”

The Boer grunted and proceeded to refill his pipe, while the two young men went out and across to the rough shelter, where they found their ponies looking evidently the better for a good feed, and the Kaffir grinning and ready to pat their plumped-out figures, the ponies taking the touch of his hand as a friendly caress.

“Eat a big lot,” said the Kaffir, in the Boer tongue. “Ah, like this,” and he held a native basket for their inspection, at the bottom of which was a specimen of the corn with which the ponies had been fed.

“That’s right, Jack! Capital; hard as shot! There’s another shilling for you!”

The Kaffir grinned again with delight as he took the money.

“Good baas!” he said. “Two good baas! Baas want boy, Jack come ’long with you!”

“Not this time, my lad!”

“Very glad to come ’long with good baas!” said the man, in a disappointed tone of voice.

“No, we can’t take you, my lad,” said West, patting the big fellow on the

shoulder. “Have the ponies saddled at daylight. We’re going early.”

The black nodded his head, and the pair, weary enough now from their long journey, and drowsy after their hearty meal, strode slowly back to the house, to find that the table had been cleared, save that a couple of big bread cakes lay on one end alongside of a little pile of biltong, the sun-dried mahogany-looking strips of ox-flesh so much in use among the rough farmers of the veldt.

The dirty-looking room smelt hot and stuffy, but a little window at the back had been thrown open, and the soft air blowing from off miles of plain made the place a little more bearable.

A common lamp had been lighted, and a streak of light came from beneath the ill-fitting door which led into the other room, from which the low murmur of voices could be heard as the young men entered talking cheerily together.

This announced their return, and the door creaked upon its hinges, giving entrance to the farmer, who pointed to the next day’s provisions and significantly held out his hand.

“How much?” said West, and the man demanded an unconscionable amount, which made the pair exchange glances. But Ingleborough nodded as much as to say: “Pay the thief!” and the money was handed over and taken with a grunt. After this the Boer passed into the next room, closing the door after him; but it did not prevent the acid voice of the vrouw from reaching the visitors’ ears as if to protest.

“The old scoundrel won’t hand over the plunder,” said Ingleborough, with a chuckle. “I hope she’ll give him what we didn’t—a thorough good tongue-thrashing.”

He had hardly spoken when he found that he had jumped at a wrong conclusion, for the door was pulled open again and the Boer reappeared.

“Tante Ann says you are to make haste and put out the lamp,” he growled, “for she don’t want to be burned in her bed.”

“All right, uncle,” replied Ingleborough. “Good night, and bless you for a

fine specimen of the noble, freedom-loving Boer. Say good night to Tante too, and tell her that our sleeping chamber is the very perfection of domestic comfort."

"Hunk!" ejaculated the farmer, and he disappeared again.

"I wonder that he did not turn upon you," said West, rather reproachfully; "he must have understood that you were speaking sarcastically."

"Not he," said his companion. "Thick-headed, muddy-brained brute; more like a quadruped than a man! The Kaffirs are gentlemen to some of these up-country farmers, and yet they are the slaves."

"Too tired to discuss moral ethics!" said West sleepily; "but really this place is awful. Agricultural implements in one corner, sacks of something in another, horns, saddles, tools—oh, I'm too sleepy to go on. Hallo! He has taken those two rifles away that were slung over that low cupboard."

"To be sure; so he has! Afraid we should steal them, perhaps, and be off before he woke! I say, did you notice how he examined ours?"

"Yes; I fancied he had noticed that they were Mausers."

"Oh no. They were fresh to him. Well, I'm going to take care that he doesn't help himself to them. I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going to lie down on one side of that bed just as I am, bandolier and all, and I vote we lay the rifles between us."

"I shall do the same," said West. "What do you say to leaving the door and window open for the sake of the fresh air? No fear of lions here?"

"I don't know so much about that, but we should get some warning from the horses and oxen. Bah! It's not likely. What now?"

There was a heavy thumping at the door leading into the other room, and the vrouw's shrill voice was heard ordering them to put out the light.

"Tell her, West, that her royal commands shall be instantly obeyed by her obedient slaves."

“Shan’t,” replied West. “That will quiet her,” and he turned out the light, putting an end to its abominable emanation of coarse petroleum, while the soft starry light of a glorious night stole in, showing the shapes of door and windows.

“Hah! That’s better!” said Ingleborough, making the rough bedstead creak as he laid himself gently down. “I hope none of these cartridges will explode. Oh, how I can sleep!”

“And so can I,” sighed West, “even dressed up like this,” after laying his rifle alongside of his companion’s, straight down the middle of the bed.

“We didn’t tell Jack the Kaffir to bring our shaving-water at daybreak,” said Ingleborough, who now that he was in a horizontal position seemed to have suddenly grown wakeful. “I say.”

“Well?”

“I wonder how our dear friend Anson is!”

West made no reply.

“I say! West!”

“Oh, don’t talk, please. I want to sleep.”

“All right, you shall, till I see the pearly dawn streaming in through that little window at the back here. I say, though, if you hear me turn round in the night and the cartridges begin to pop, just wake me up, or there may be an accident.”

West again made no reply.

“And we should have Tante Ann waking up, when there would be a greater explosion still. There, good night!”

“Good night.”

Then silence, save that the cry of some prowling creature far out on the veldt sounded wonderfully like the baying of a dog.

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Dark Visitor.

An hour must have passed away, during which neither of the weary bearers of the despatch moved. Then in a low whisper West spoke.

“Asleep, Ingle?”

“Asleep? No,” was whispered back. “I can’t close my eyes.”

“Neither can I.”

“Why not?”

“Over tired and excited, I suppose. All this is so strange too.”

“What have you been thinking about?”

“At first I could only think of the despatch and wonder whether we should get it to Mafeking. Then I began thinking of that black out in the stable and what he said.”

“About his master wanting his pony saddled?” whispered Ingleborough.

“Yes. What did he want his pony saddled for at that time of night?”

“How strange!” said Ingleborough. “That’s what kept on bothering me!”

“Ingle.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that fellow meant treachery?”

“I don’t know; but I’d believe in any treacherous act on the part of a Boer.”

“Would he be likely to ride off somewhere to where there is a commando?”

“For the sake of getting us taken prisoners or shot?”

“Or so as to get possession of our ponies! I saw him examining them as if he liked them.”

“So did I.”

There was silence again, and West spoke.

“Ingle,” he said, “I can’t sleep here; the despatch seems to be sticking into me to remind me of my duty. We shall rest better in our saddles than on this wretched bed. What do you say—the free cool air of the veldt, or this stuffy, paraffiny room?”

“Let’s be off, and at once!”

“We will. We can slip out quietly without waking these people, and most likely we are misjudging the man, who has the regular racial hatred of the British.”

“Perhaps; but we must be careful, for if he heard us going to the shed and meddling with the horses he’d likely enough begin blazing away at us with his rifle.”

At that moment West clutched his companion’s arm, for they heard no sound, but all at once the dark silhouette of a man’s head appeared framed in the little back window against a background of starry points which glistened like gold.

Ingleborough’s hand stole to his rifle, which he grasped, as both held their breath; but he did not attempt to raise it, for the head was thrust inside, and a voice whispered the one word: “Baas.”

“Yes,” said West softly. “What is it, my lad?”

“My baas take pony and ride away. Go to fetch fighting Boer to shoot good baas. You and good baas him.”

“Ah?” said West.

“Iss. Jack put saddles on Basuto ponies; put bridles on Basuto ponies. Good baas both come and ride away. Tant’ Ann never hear nothing. Sleep all night.”

“And if we go what will your baas do to you when he comes and finds the ponies gone?” said West.

“Bad baas never see me again! Going home to my country to-night.”

“Ah, that’s better!” said Ingleborough. “Here, take the two rifles, and we’ll get out here. Jack, my lad, you’re a trump, and you shall have five two-shilling pieces for this, to buy new blankets.”

The Kaffir chuckled and clicked with satisfaction as he stood holding the rifles till Ingleborough slipped out, West pausing to cram the bread cakes and biltong into their satchels, after which he too slipped out, and the trio hurried towards the stables.

“How far has your baas to ride to the fighting Boers?” West asked the Kaffir.

“Long ride,” replied the black. “Many Boers yesterday, many Boers other day, many Boers come in morning with baas.”

“Then we’re all right for a good start,” said Ingleborough. “I say, West, you’re always taking me into some trap: hadn’t I better lead?”

“You are leading now,” replied West. “How do we know that there are not a dozen of the enemy in the stable?”

“What! Oh, nonsense! Come along!”

The ponies whinnied as they entered, and the black struck a match and lit a wagon lantern, showing that they were ready bridled and their heads tied up to a rail, while examination proved that the saddles were properly girthed ready for a start.

“Here, stop a minute!” said Ingleborough, as the man began to unfasten the reins attached to the ponies’ heads. “Here, I promised you five two-shilling pieces,” and he counted them out ready in his hand, making the

black’s eyes sparkle with delight in the lamplight.

“Stop,” said West sharply; “the poor fellow’s losing his place, such as it is, by helping us. I have our expenses money, and I shall give him a sovereign.”

“Well, he deserves it,” said Ingleborough, as West pushed back his companion’s hand containing the silver coins with his left, and held out the sovereign, which looked very bright and new in the yellow light shed by the lantern.

A sudden change came over the Kaffir’s face at once. Instead of the grinning white teeth and twinkling eyes his lips were drawn tightly over his teeth, and a scowl contracted his eyes.

“No, no, no,” he cried, with child-like petulance, in the Boer-Dutch, sadly mutilated. “No want one. Say five big shillings.”

“What!” cried West. “Why, this is worth twice as much.”

“No, no,” cried the man angrily. “Want to cheat poor black Kaffir. No, no; Olebo want to help white baas! White baas want cheat poor black Zulu!”

“Poor old chap!” said Ingleborough, laughing merrily; “his education has been sadly neglected. Here, Jack—Olebo, or whatever your name is—take the sovereign, and you shall have the five two-shillings pieces as well.”

“Eh? No cheat Zulu boy?” cried the man doubtingly.

“No, all right; catch hold. There, now you can buy many blankets, and may you never be tricked any worse!”

“Hah! Yes; buy lot, take home!” And the white teeth were shown again as the coins were gripped fast, including the sovereign, which was held up first to the light. “White shilling? No: yellow farden.”

“All right; but take it to an honest man, my lad. Now then, untie those reins.”

The black turned to obey, but stopped short and stood staring away through the open side of the shed for a few moments, with the light shining full upon his face, showing his starting eyes, open mouth, and dilated quivering nostrils.

“What’s the matter? Can he hear a lion?” whispered West.

“Here, stop, stop!” cried Ingleborough. “Finish your job!—We’ve paid him too well and too soon. He’s off to run amok among the brandy and blanket dealers.”

For the black had darted outside, but in the gloom they saw him suddenly throw himself down and lay one ear to the ground.

“Yes, he can hear a lion,” grumbled Ingleborough; “but the ponies haven’t caught it yet.”

He had hardly finished speaking before the Kaffir sprang up again and dashed into the shed, where he reached up and dragged something from the rafters which proved to be an elephant-hide shield with three assegais secured to the hand-hold inside.

“Baas hold this!” he said excitedly. “Boer coming. Olebo hear horses!”

Half throwing the weapons to Ingleborough, who caught them, and leaned them against his side while he examined the charges of his rifle, an action imitated by West, the Kaffir rapidly unfastened the reins, setting the ponies’ heads free, and then darted at the lantern, opened the door, and blew out the light.

“Now come ’long,” he whispered, and taking the ponies’ heads he placed himself between them and led them along, stopping the next moment to hold them steady while their riders mounted.

“Olebo run ’long with two baas show the way,” he said. “Basuto ponies tumble over ostrich pens.”

“Hah! Good idea!” said West, and, listening now, he fancied he made out the sound of a troop of horse in the distance; but Ingleborough said he could hear nothing yet.

Leaving themselves to the guidance of the Kaffir, they found to their surprise that, instead of striking straight off, he led them to the house, and then round to the back, where the little window by whose means he had stolen close to where they lay and given the alarm stood open.

“Here, take your shield!” said Ingleborough.

“Wait a bit!” replied the black, chuckling.

“Hist! You’ll have the old vrouw hear.”

“No,” said the black confidently; “fast asleep. Wicked old witch! Throw kettle at Kaffir, hot water burn back! Wait a bit; you see!”

Dependent as they were on the man’s guidance through the darkness amongst the enclosures, the fugitives left him to himself for a few moments, wondering what he was about to do.

They soon knew, for he stopped the ponies close to the little window, left their heads, and went close up, to begin fumbling about his spare garments, whence came the chink of the coins he had just received.

“Matches,” he said, and West made out that he took a few from the box he held in his hand, and then reached in at the window, chuckling softly.

“Ingle,” whispered. West, with horror in his voice. “What’s the matter?”

“Do you know what he’s doing?”

“Nobbling a couple of the blankets because he isn’t going to stay for his wages?”

“No; I’m sure he has emptied the match-box on the straw mattress, and is going to burn down the house.”

“Nonsense!”

Crack! went a match by way of endorsement of West’s words, and the next moment the little flame began to burn inside the Kaffir’s hands, lighting up his exulting countenance as he waited till the splint of wood

was well alight.

“What are you going to do?” said West hoarsely, as he leaned forward and laid his right hand upon the black’s shoulder.

“Don’t shake light out!” was the answer. “Olebo going make big fire, roast Tant’ Ann! Big fat witch, soon burn!”

As the Kaffir finished he lowered one hand, leaving the match blazing brightly, and he was in the act of leaning in to apply it to the little heap of matches he had placed upon the loose straw mattress, when a sharp snatch at his shoulder jerked him back, and the burning splint dropped to the ground.

“Ah–h–ah!” growled the man savagely, and he drew another match across the box he still held.

“None of that!” growled Ingleborough sternly.

“Wicked old witch!” said the black, in remonstrance. “Burn Olebo! Don’t give him enough to eat! No good!”

“You come along,” cried West. “I can hear the Boers coming fast. Now then, lead the horses clear of the pens!”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Night on the Veldt.

The Kaffir grunted, and began what Ingleborough afterwards called “chuntering,” but he obeyed at once, leading the ponies at a quick walk in and out amongst several ostrich enclosures, till they were quite a quarter of a mile from the farm, from which there came the buzz of voices and the occasional stamp of a horse on the still night air.

“No more wire fence!” said their guide, and indicating that they should urge the ponies forward he took his shield and spears from Ingleborough, caught hold of the mane of West’s pony, and then as they broke into a

canter, ran lightly by the animal's side, talking softly, and now and then breaking out into a merry laugh.

"Ought burn Tant' Ann!" he said. "Wicked old witch! Very fat! Make her good vrouw!"

"I'm afraid Jack's morals are sadly in need of improvement, lad," said Ingleborough at last.

"What a horrible idea!" replied West, with a shudder; "and the worst of it is that the fellow seems to consider that it would have been a good piece of fun."

"Yes, it is his nature to, as we are told of the bears and lions in the poems of Dr Watts. I dare say the old woman had been a horrible tyrant to the poor fellow!"

"But the hideous revenge!"

"Which hasn't come off, my lad! But the black scoundrel's ideas are shocking in the extreme, and I would not associate with him much in the future. Here! Hi! Olebo, stop!"

The young man drew rein, and the black looked up enquiringly.

"Lie down and listen for the Boers!"

The Kaffir nodded, and trotted a dozen yards away from the side of the ponies, threw himself down, listened, jumped up, and repeated the performance three times at greater distances before returning.

"No hear!" he said. "Gone other way."

"It would be safe then to strike a match and look at the compass," suggested West, and, taking out his box, he struck a light, shaded it in his slouch hat, and then held the little pocket compass to it.

"Well, which way are we going?"

"Due east."

“Then we’ll turn due north, and travel that way till to-morrow night, and see what that brings forth.”

Starting off again, they journeyed on, sometimes at a walk, sometimes at an easy canter, so as to save the horses as much as possible, while the Kaffir kept up, seeming not in the slightest degree distressed, but ready to enter into conversation at any time, after changing from one side to the other so as to hold on by a different hand.

“Soon be daylight now,” said West; “but I hope this fellow does not expect to keep on with us, does he?”

“Oh no, I don’t think so for a moment. We’ll pull up before sunrise at some sheltered place and have a good look-out for danger before letting the ponies graze and having breakfast. Let’s see what happens then!”

But the sun was well up before a suitable kopje came in sight, one so small that it did not appear likely to contain enemies, but sufficiently elevated to give an observer a good view for miles through the clear veldt air.

“Looks safe!” said Ingleborough; “but burnt English children fear the Boer fire. Let’s have a good circle round.”

This was begun, and the black instantly grasped what was intended, and hanging well down from West’s stirrup-leather, he began to search the ground carefully for tracks, looking up from time to time and pointing out those of antelopes, lions, and ostriches, but never the hoof of horse or the footprint of man.

“No Boer there!” he said. “No one come. Good water,” he continued, pointing to the slight tracts of grass which had sprung up where a stream rising among the rocks was losing itself in the dry soil, but which looked brighter and greener as it was nearer to the kopje, which was fairly furnished with thorn-bush and decent-sized trees.

“Any Boers hiding there?” said West sharply.

“Boers ride there on ponies!” replied the Kaffir decisively, as he pointed down at the drab dust. “No ponies make marks.”

“That’s enough,” said Ingleborough. “Come along.”

Without hesitation now they put their mounts to a canter, rode up to the pleasant refreshing-looking place, and after leaving the ponies with the Kaffir and climbing to one of the highest points, took a good look round. This proved that there was not a mounted man in sight, and they descended to select a spot where there was plenty of herbage and water for their steeds, when they sat down and began to breakfast.

“Nothing like a fine appetite,” said West, after they had been eating for some little time; “but this biltong is rather like eating a leg of mahogany dining-table into which a good deal of salt gravy and furniture oil has been allowed to soak.”

“Yes, it is rather wooden,” said Ingleborough coolly. “Must wear out a man’s teeth a good deal.”

“Eland,” said the Kaffir, tapping his stick of the dried meat on seeing his companions examining and smelling the food. “Old baas shoot eland, Olebo cut him up and dry him in the sun. Good.”

“Well, it isn’t bad, O child of nature! But I say, how far do you mean to come with us?”

“No go any more,” replied the man. “Go Olebo kraal, see wife. Give her big shilling and little yellow shilling.—Good?”

He brought out the sovereign from where it had been placed, and held it up.

“Good? Yes,” said West, and he set to work to try and explain by making the black bring out a florin and then holding up his outspread ten fingers, when the man seemed to have some idea of his meaning.

“Look here, I’ll get it into his benighted intellect; but I should have thought that he would have known what a sovereign was worth.”

Just then the Kaffir nodded sharply, after examining the coin.

“Gold?” he said, in Dutch.

“Of course,” said Ingleborough, taking out a sovereign and ten more florins, which he placed in a heap and at a short distance from the little pile he laid down the sovereign. “Look here, Olebo,” he said, taking up the ten florins. “Buy four blankets!”

The Kaffir nodded, and his instructor replaced the heavy coins in his pocket to take up the sovereign.

“Now, see here,” said Ingleborough, holding it out. “Buy four blankets.”

“Ah!” cried the delighted black, snatching out his own treasured coins, the gold in one hand, the silver in the other. “Buy four blankets for Olebo wife,” he cried, holding forward the silver. Then putting it behind him he held out the sovereign: “Buy four blankets for Olebo.”

“Now we’ve got it,” cried West, laughing, and watching the way in which the black hid his cash away. “I say,” he continued, to his companion, speaking in English, “where does he put that money to keep it safe?”

“I dunno,” said Ingleborough. “It seems to come natural to these Kaffirs to hide away their treasures cunningly. See how artful they are over the diamonds! He doesn’t put the cash in his trousers pockets, nor yet in his waistcoat, nor yet his coat, because he has neither one nor the other. I expect he has a little snake-skin bag somewhere inside his leather-loincloth. But here, I’m thirsty; let’s have some water!”

As he spoke Ingleborough sprang up and walked towards the head of the spruit, followed by his companions, and they passed the two ponies, which were hard at work on the rich green herbage along the border of the stream. Then, getting well ahead of them, all lay down and thoroughly quenched their thirst.

“Now,” said West, “what next? We ought to go on at once,” and he unconsciously laid his hand upon the spot where the despatch was hidden.

“No,” replied Ingleborough, “that won’t do. We seem safe here, and we must hasten slowly. We’re ready enough to go on, but the ponies must be properly nursed. They want more grass and a rest.”

“The sun is getting hot too,” said West, in acknowledgment of his comrade’s words of wisdom.

“We’ll stop till evening, lad,” continued Ingleborough, “and take it in turn to sleep in the shade of those bushes if we can find a soft spot. We had no rest last night.”

“I suppose that must be it,” replied West, and he joined in a sigh on finding a satisfactory spot beneath a mass of granite from which overhung a quantity of thorn-bush and creeper which formed an impenetrable shade.

The black followed them, noting keenly every movement and trying hard to gather the meaning of the English words.

“Two baas lie down long time, go to sleep,” he said at last, in broken Dutch. “Olebo sit and look, see if Boer come. See Boer, make baas wake up.”

“No,” said West; “you two lie down and sleep. I’ll take the first watch.”

Ingleborough made no opposition, and after West had climbed up to a spot beneath a tree from which he could get a good stretch of the veldt in view, the others lay down at once and did not stir a limb till West stepped down to them, when the Kaffir sprang up without awakening Ingleborough.

“Olebo look for Boers now,” he said.

West hesitated, and the Kaffir grasped the meaning of his silence.

“Olebo come and tell baas when big old baas go to fetch Boers,” he said.

“So you did,” cried the young Englishman warmly, “and I’ll trust you now. Mind the ponies don’t stray away.”

The black showed his beautiful, white teeth in a happy satisfied laugh.

“Too much grass, too much nice water,” he said. “Basuto pony don’t go away from baas only to find grass.”

“You’re right!” said West. “Wait till the sun is there!” he continued, pointing to where it would be about two hours after mid-day, “and then wake the other baas.”

The Kaffir nodded, and West lay down to rest, as he put it to himself, for he was convinced that he would be unable to sleep; but he had not lain back five minutes, gazing at the sunlit rivulet and the ponies grazing, before his lids closed and all was nothingness till he was roused by a touch from Ingleborough.

The sun was just dipping like a huge orange ball in the vermilion and golden west.

“Had a good nap, old fellow?”

“Oh, it’s wonderful!” said the young man, springing up. “I don’t seem to have been asleep five minutes.”

“I suppose not. Well, all’s right, and Blackjack is waiting to say good-bye. He wants to start off home.”

The Kaffir came up from where he had been patting and caressing the ponies, and stood looking at them as motionless in the ruddy evening light as a great bronze image.

“Olebo go now,” he said, turning his shield to show that the remains of his share of the provisions were secured to the handle by a rough net of freshly-plaited grassy rush. “Olebo see baas, both baas, some day.” He accompanied the words with a wistful look at each, and before they could think of what to say in reply he turned himself sharply and ran off at a rapid rate, getting out of sight as quickly as he could by keeping close to the bushes, before striking out into the veldt.

“Humph! I suppose they are treacherous savages, some of them,” said Ingleborough thoughtfully; “but there doesn’t seem to be much harm in that fellow if he were used well.”

“I believe he’d make a very faithful servant,” said West sadly. “I’m beginning to be sorry we let him go.”

“So am I. We shall feel quite lonely without him. But the despatch.”

“Ah, yes, the despatch!” said West, pulling himself together. “Now then, boot and saddle, and a long night’s ride!”

“And a good day’s rest afterwards! That’s the way we must get on.”

A quarter of an hour after, they had taken their bearings by compass and mounted, when the well-refreshed ponies started off at once in a brisk canter, necessitating the drawing of the rein from time to time; and then it was on, on, on at different rates beneath the wonderfully bright stars of a glorious night, during which they passed several farms and one good-sized village, which were carefully avoided, for they had enough provisions to last them for another day, and naturally if a halt was to be made to purchase more it would have to be at a seasonable time.

“Yes,” said Ingleborough laughingly, “it would be a sure way of getting cartridges if we wanted them and roused up a Boer farmer in the night. He would soon give us some, the wrong way on.”

“Yes,” said West, “and there would be the dogs to deal with as well. Hark at that deep-mouthed brute!”

For just then the cantering of their ponies had been heard by the watch-dog at one of the farms, and it went on baying at them till the sounds grew faint.

Then it was on and on again till a strange feeling of weariness began to oppress them, and they had to fight with the desire which made them bend forward and nod over their ponies’ necks, rising up again with a dislocating start.

At the second time of this performance West made a great effort and began watching his companion, to see that he was just as bad. Then the intense desire to sleep began to master the watcher again.

“Hi, Ingle!” he cried. “Rouse up, and let’s walk for a mile or two.”

“Yes, yes.—What’s that?” cried Ingleborough, springing off his pony and cocking his rifle.

For there was a sudden rushing noise as of a great crowd of animals, of what kind it was still too dark to see; but it was evident that they had come suddenly upon a migratory herd of the graceful-limbed antelopes that had probably been grazing and had been startled into flight.

“Pity it was not light!” said Ingleborough, with a sigh. “We could have got some fresh meat, and then at the first patch of wood and pool of water we could have had a fire and frizzled antelope-steaks.”

But a couple of hours later, when they halted for their rest and refreshment, it was stale cake, hard biltong, and cool fresh water.

“Never mind, we’re miles nearer Mafeking!” said West. “How many more nights will it take?”

The answer to that question had not been arrived at when they dropped asleep, lulled by the sound of rippling water and the *crop, crop, crop* made by the grazing ponies, and this time their weariness was so great that sleep overcame them both. Ingleborough was to have watched, but nature was too strong, and both slept till sundown, to rise up full of a feeling of self-reproach.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

A Loud Report.

Days of rest and nights of travel succeeded, during which the despatch-riders began to wonder at the ease with which they progressed.

“I thought it would be twice as hard a task!” said West. “Here have we been two days without a sign of a Boer! We must be very near Mafeking now.”

“Yes, very,” said Ingleborough drily; “nearer than I thought. Halt!”

He drew rein as he spoke, West’s pony stopping short at the same time as its companion.

They had been riding steadily on through the night, and now as the ponies stood side by side they stretched out their necks in the soft cool darkness, and the sound of their cropping told that they were amongst grass.

“Why did you pull up?” said West, in a cautious whisper.

“For you to hear how near we are to Mafeking now.”

“Near?”

“Yes; can’t you hear the firing?”

“No,” said West, after a few moments’ pause. “Yes, now I do,” he cried eagerly, for all at once there was a dull concussion as if a blow had been delivered in the air.

“A heavy gun,” cried West excitedly.

“Hist!”

“I forgot,” said West softly. “That must be one of the siege guns,” he continued.

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, “and it must be near daybreak, with the bombarding beginning. Be careful; perhaps we are nearer the enemy than we thought.”

At the end of a couple of minutes there was the dull concussion of another heavy gun, and this was continued at intervals of ten or fifteen minutes during the next hour, while the adventurers advanced cautiously at a walk, keeping a sharp look-out through the transparent darkness for a patch of rocks or woodland which might serve for their next halt. But day had quite dawned before a suitable place of refuge presented itself, in the shape of one of the low kopjes.

“Dismount!” whispered Ingleborough sharply, and they spent the next ten minutes carefully scanning the district round in full expectation of seeing some sign of the enemy.

But nothing worse was in view than two or three of the scattered farms of the open veldt, and in the distance a dark indistinct patch which appeared to be a herd of grazing cattle, but so distant that neither could be sure.

On their way to the patch of rock and brush that was to be their last resting-place before making a dash for the beleaguered town, they struck upon the trail going north and south, and in two places scared off vultures from the carcass of an unfortunate ox, shrunken and dried in the sun till little but the bones and hide were left.

They were too distant to make out the smoke, but steadily increasing fire told plainly enough that they were quite near enough for a dash into the town when darkness set in that night.

“You think then that this will be the best way?” said West, as they reached their shelter without seeing a sign of danger.

“I am not sure yet!” replied Ingleborough. “In fact, I’m very doubtful whether we should not fail, for the place is certain to be surrounded by the enemy, and we should very likely be ridden or shot down.”

Oliver West laid his hand upon the despatch, pressing it so that the paper crackled beneath the cloth.

“Then we had better ride in as near as we dare, and then try and creep in at the darkest time.”

“Let’s pray for the clouds to be thick then!” said Ingleborough; “for the moon’s getting past the first quarter. Last night would have done exactly.”

“But we were not here. Hark at the firing!”

“Yes; it sounds as if Mafeking will be taken before we get there!”

“For goodness’ sake don’t talk like that!”

“Don’t let’s talk at all then. Let’s get well into shelter. But I see no sign of water yet.”

Neither did the speaker after they had carefully explored the rocky hillock,

but fortunately there was an ample supply of succulent grass for the ponies, which were soon after luxuriating in a good roll, before grazing contentedly away, while their riders, after another examination of the place and glance round from the highest point, had to satisfy themselves with a very scanty shelter and a much scantier meal.

“Never mind,” said Ingleborough; “we shall be breakfasting in luxury to-morrow morning, I hope, with our appetites sharpened by the knowledge that we have achieved our task.”

“I hope so!” said West gravely.

“But don’t doubt, my lad,” cried Ingleborough cheerily. “Don’t be downhearted now we are so near!”

“I can’t help it!” replied West. “I feel on thorns, and my state of anxiety will grow worse and worse till we get there. Hark at the firing!”

“I can hear,” said Ingleborough coolly. “Be very deaf if I couldn’t! There, that’s the last scrap of cake, so let’s drown our troubles in sleep. You have first turn!”

“No,” replied West. “I feel too anxious to sleep! You begin.”

“Can’t,” was the reply. “If anything, I feel more anxious than you do. I couldn’t rest!”

“I wish we could canter gently on till we were seen by the Boers, and then go on full gallop right into the town!” said West. “Would it be too dangerous?”

“Just madness!” replied Ingleborough. “No; it must be done with guile. They would cut us off for certain.”

“I’m afraid so!” said West. “Very well, then, we must wait for the evening.”

“And sit wakeful,” said Ingleborough.

“Yes,” said West. “Sleep is impossible!”

And sit there wakeful they did, hour after hour, their only satisfaction being that of seeing their weary horses enjoying a good feed untroubled by the increasing heat, or the cares which harassed their masters.

For as the sun rose higher the distant firing increased, till it was evident that a terrible attack was going on, and in his weariness and despair no words on the part of Ingleborough had any effect upon West, who felt convinced that before they could continue their journey Mafeking would have fallen into the enemy's hands.

There was no further talk of sleep. The heat, flies, hunger, and a burning thirst were either of them sufficient to have kept them awake, without the terrible feeling of anxiety and the alarms caused by bodies of horsemen or lines of wagons journeying in the direction they were waiting to take.

Again and again parties of the Boers seemed to be coming straight for the hiding-place, and West and his companion crept on hands and knees towards their ponies, getting hold of their reins, and then crouching by them ready to mount and gallop for their lives should the necessity arise.

But it did not, and in a strangely-feverish dreamlike way the day glided on and evening at last came, bringing with it wafts of cooler air and, what was of more consequence to them still, a feeling of hope, for though the firing still went on, it had dwindled down into the slow steady reports of one heavy piece discharged at about the same rate as when they had first heard the firing in the morning.

"And it tells its own tale with truthful lips!" said Ingleborough. "The town is still holding out, and the defenders have ceased to reply."

"Because they are nearly beaten!" said West sadly.

"By no means, you croaking old raven!" cried Ingleborough cheerily. "It's because they want to save their ammunition! They only want to fire when they have something worth firing at. As for the enemy, they have the whole town to shoot at, and keep on pitching their shells in at random. There, don't be grumpy!"

"I can't help it!" cried West passionately. "Give me credit for having kept up well till now. It's because we are so near success that I feel everything

so keenly."

"I know, old fellow, and you may trust me!" said Ingleborough. "I didn't play a false prophet's part just to encourage you. I'm speaking the simple truth! Just a little more patience, and you shall deliver your despatch."

"If I could only feel that!" cried West. "It may be the saving of Mafeking to receive news perhaps of help being on the way."

"Be patient then! It will soon be night, and then we'll mount and make our final dash!"

"No," said West bitterly; "we shall have to make it now. Look."

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Hard Pushed.

Ingleborough shaded his eyes and turned very grave, for on gazing in the direction pointed out by his companion's finger he saw a column of horsemen creeping over the veldt as if coming straight for their resting-place, while as they came nearer the eager watchers could make out that the party were guarding a long train of wagons drawn by great teams of oxen. They found that there were two other teams, not of oxen, but of ponies similar to their own, and not dragging the great tilt-covered wagons, but something heavy and comparatively small.

"Guns!" said Ingleborough laconically.

"Yes, and heavy guns too!" cried West.

"You're right, lad; and they will not come near us. It's an ammunition train, and they'll go straight for Mafeking! That's another false alarm!"

Ingleborough was quite right, for the distant train crept slowly on along the track till it grew dim and distant as the sun sank lower and finally disappeared in the haze of dust. But the troubles of the despatch-bearers were not at an end, and they lay watching the west with its great masses

of lit-up clouds, glorious in their colouring, till the last bright lights had died out, before they turned to look in the direction of the east. And then West drew his companion's attention to the fact that behind them the sky was perfectly clear, and the pale moon, a couple of days past the first quarter, was gradually growing brighter and brighter in what promised to be a perfectly unclouded night.

"Yes," said Ingleborough coolly; "we shall have a glorious time for our ride."

"A glorious night for the Boer outposts to take aim at us as we ride in."

"No," said Ingleborough coolly. "I think not!"

"What do you mean?" said West, turning sharply upon his companion. "You have some fresh idea?"

"Well, yes. Being in such a pickle as this sets a man sharpening his wits to try and make them keen."

"Of course. What are you going to do?"

"Wait a bit and see!" replied Ingleborough coolly. "I'm sharpening still."

West turned away impatiently, to go, stooping as low as he could, towards his pony, which was straggling away, and bring it back to the bushes which had helped to hide them all the day, after which they sat in silence for about an hour, until it was quite plain that the night was as dark as it was likely to be. Then in a nervous excited way he turned to Ingleborough again.

"Yes," said the latter, without waiting for West to speak; "it will grow no darker unless we wait hours for the moon to set, and by that time I hope we shall be in Mafeking."

"What do you mean to do then?"

"Mount and ride steadily on at a gentle canter till we get in touch with that ammunition train."

“But we shall be challenged by their rear-guard.”

“Perhaps,” said Ingleborough coolly; “perhaps not. I reckon on getting pretty close up without. If we are challenged, I want you to do as I tell you.”

“Of course,” replied West. “Anything to fulfil our task!”

“Ready?”

“And waiting!”

“Then mount!”

Their ponies were waiting patiently by their sides, and the next minute they had sprung into the saddles and rode off in the direction taken by the train.

West asked no questions, for he was full of confidence in his long-tried companion, and with the ponies well-refreshed and eager from their rest, they rode steadily on, keeping a sharp look-out for danger, but meeting with no adventure for quite a couple of hours, by which time both felt that they must be getting near to the end of their journey.

But they had nothing to guide them, for they were off the track, and even had they been on, it would have been impossible to follow it in the strange eerie light shed by the quarter-moon. Once they had evidence that they were in all probability going right, for a horrible odour suddenly assailed their nostrils, making them press their ponies’ sides and go past something indistinct at a gallop, holding their breath till they were well beyond what was in all probability the body of some wretched horse or ox that had died of overwork and exhaustion.

“We must keep on now!” whispered Ingleborough. “I feel that we are going right.”

“But the Boer laagers and outposts!” whispered back West.

“Somewhere ahead, lad; but we must leave something to chance. We are, say, within half-a-dozen miles of Mafeking, so I put it; perhaps not

more than two or three. Keep a sharp look-out for lights."

"The enemy's?"

"Or friends'," replied Ingleborough. "There's a good deal of chance now, and we must trust a little to our luck."

"In other words, you mean make a bold dash?"

"Yes, but not a blind one! I want to put a little gumption into what we do! You'll trust me?"

"I will!"

"Forward then, and give the ponies their heads!"

West gave vent to a deep low "Hah!" of satisfaction, and away they went, with their mounts seeming to exult in the freedom from pressure on their bits, keeping close together, and bounding along over the level veldt as if perfectly familiar with the way, though their riders knew it to be bespread with pitfalls in the shape of the burrows made by the aardvarks and other animals that made the wide open veldt their home.

The moon shone brightly now, though the light was puzzling, and the distance ahead looked strange and weird; but the pace at which they were going had a peculiarly exhilarating effect upon both of the riders, who seemed to share the excitement of their ponies.

For, guesswork though it was, West felt that Mafeking must lie right ahead, and as they dashed on he began to feel a kind of certainty that if left to themselves their sagacious steeds would take them right into the town.

A good four miles must have been passed over in this way, and at last a fresh sensation began to attack West, filling him with anxiety lest they should be going in the wrong direction. For he argued that they must before now, if right, have come upon signs of the besiegers, and he was in the act of leaning over towards Ingleborough to make him acquainted with his fears, when all doubt was chased away by a loud challenge from his right, followed by a flash and a report.

That one shot was the opening note of an overture, for directly after the balls began whistling over their heads, and the first reports grew into a loud rattle followed by the trampling of horses and loud shouting.

“It’s all right,” said Ingleborough coolly; “they’re firing at random. It’s impossible to take aim on a night like this! Can you see them?”

“No; only the flashes!” said West excitedly.

“That’s enough! Then they can’t see us! We’re through their lines too, for they’re firing behind us, and I’ll back our horses to beat theirs in a race.”

Reports now began to ring out on their right, and directly after they came from their left.

“Shall we shout?” whispered West.

“No. What for?”

“We must be getting among our own people!”

“No such luck, my lad! Keep steadily on! Ah! Poor beast!”

“What is it?” said West excitedly, as his mount stopped short, obeying its natural instinct and the love of companionship of a gregarious animal. For Ingleborough’s pony had suddenly uttered a peculiar neighing cry, reared up, and fallen backwards.

“Are you hurt?” whispered West again.

“No; I just escaped! Quick; jump down.”

West was on his feet directly, and Ingleborough grasped his arm.

“I’d say ride for it alone, lad,” he whispered, with his lips close to his companion’s ear; “but my way is safest. Now down on your hands and knees and let’s play wild dog or baboon!”

“I don’t understand you!” whispered West.

“Never mind; do as I do!” and the next minute they were going along on

hands and knees over the level ground, feeling it quiver with the trampling of galloping horses all round, while the flashing of rifles and the crackling reports seemed to be coming from all directions.

So near to them came some of the horsemen that West felt certain they must be seen; but there was no hail, no whistling bullet, and, wearisome though the way of progression was to the muscles and painful to hands and knees, West kept on side by side with his companion till the firing began to drop off and then ceased, though the hurrying to and fro of horses still went on.

“It was sooner than I intended,” said Ingleborough at last; “but I meant for us to dismount at last and crawl. If we are seen the enemy will take us for hyaenas or dogs.”

He had hardly whispered these words before a shot was fired from, their left, the bullet whistling over them, when to the astonishment of West, Ingleborough uttered a snarling yelp, followed by an excellent imitation of a dog’s bark.

“Do as I do!” he whispered, and the next moment he had thrown himself upon his side and lay perfectly still.

“What folly!” West was disposed to say; but he followed his companion’s example, letting himself sink sidewise like a dying quadruped, feeling the despatch crackle beneath him as he lay listening to the trampling of horses growing more distant, and waiting for Ingleborough to speak.

“Seems a stupid sort of dodge!” said the latter at last; “but I thought it better to let them think we were hyaenas than human beings.”

“But we had a narrow escape of being shot!” replied West.

“Yes, and escaped. If they had taken us for human beings we should have been either shot or taken prisoners. Now we’re safe!”

“Safe, with this bright moon shining ready to show every movement?”

“Then why move until we are safe, lad? The enemy will not come near us so long as they think we are dead animals.”

“But if they make out what we are—how then?”

“How then?” said Ingleborough, with a low sarcastic laugh. “Why, then they’ll behave like Boers, and come and see if there’s anything worth taking in our pockets. They are sweet people! But wait a bit. As soon as they are farther off we’ll continue our journey.”

“Without our horses?”

“Yes; poor beasts! I’m sorry they’re gone; but daybreak will show us that we are close to Mafeking, I feel sure. We’ll crawl on as far as we can, and then get up and run for our lives.”

“Yes; but you know how clever they are at bringing down a running buck!”

“Some of them!” said Ingleborough drily.

“Well, if I am brought down, don’t hesitate a moment: out with your knife, rip open my jacket, get the despatch, and run on.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Of course.”

“What about you? Are you to be left wounded here on the veldt?”

“Yes: until the despatch reaches the proper hands. Then come and save me if you can.”

“I understand,” said Ingleborough drily. “That’s if matters come to the worst! Let’s hope they will not!”

He raised his head a little and had a good look round as soon as he had finished speaking, for all was now very still, and as far as he could make out in the eerie light there was not a Boer within sight.

“Now then,” he said softly; “let’s go on! No, no; not like that. Crawl, man, crawl.”

He only spoke in time, for West was about to spring up. Then their painful

imitation of some quadruped recommenced, West following his comrade patiently and unquestioningly till a change seemed to come over the light.

“Morning coming fast!” said West.

“The sooner the better,” was the reply; “for I’m not sure that we are going right.”

“I’m sure we’re going wrong,” said West quickly.

“Why?”

“Because we are going straight for that great wagon laager.”

“Yes; there’s Mafeking, with its corrugated-iron roofs, off to our right.”

“Hah!” ejaculated West, for at that moment there was a flash from the front of the laager they were approaching, followed by a tremendous roar and a hissing sound overhead, as a shell winged its way towards the town, whose outskirts were certainly not more than a couple of miles away.

“We’ve wasted ever so much strength,” said Ingleborough; “but never mind: we know exactly where we are. It’s about two miles’ run to the nearest houses. What do you say—go on crawling, or make a dash?”

“It will be broad daylight directly,” replied West, “then we shall be discovered, and become the mark for every rifle within range. I say let’s get up and walk steadily on till we see that we are discovered, and then run for our lives.”

“Wait a moment! Do you know how we shall find out that we are discovered?”

“Yes,” said West coolly; “we shall have the bullets whistling about us.”

“Well, you are cool!” said Ingleborough. “That’s it; and in addition we shall have some of the mounted Boers coming at full gallop.”

“Perhaps,” said West; “and perhaps the Mafeking outposts will begin

firing to cover us. Now then, I feel breathless to begin, for it's rapidly getting lighter. Come on!"

They rose quietly, and set off, making straight for the nearest building—a long, low, broad place with a corrugated-iron roof which seemed to be perfectly deserted; but it had one advantage—it was the nearest object to where they were, and it would, if they could reach it, form cover from which they could fire upon any mounted Boer who came in pursuit.

Then with the day broadening rapidly they walked steadily on, with shell after shell arching over their heads, to fall and burst far in advance, right away in the town; but there was no sign of pursuit for quite ten minutes, and not a friend anywhere visible in the outskirts the fugitives approached.

"Now then," shouted Ingleborough suddenly; "be cool, and as you run unsling your rifle and be ready for a shot, for I'm going to fight to the last."

"Make for that shed?"

"Yes. Forward; here they come."

Away they went, for West at his companion's warning had looked sharply round, to see about a score of mounted Boers dashing after them at full gallop, and the fugitives had hardly got into the full swing of their stride before they heard *cracky crack, crack*, the reports of rifles far in the rear, and *ping, ping*, *ping*, the whistling buzz of the thin bullets, several of which came unpleasantly near.

"Open out half-a-dozen yards," said Ingleborough, "and lessen their mark! Think we shall reach that shed?"

"No," said West coolly. "It's farther off than I thought. Let's stop at that clump yonder, and lie behind it to fire back."

"Very well; but they'll ring round us and we shall be taken in flank and rear."

"Not till we've brought down two of them," said West, through his teeth.

“Two apiece,” said Ingleborough. “Now then, put on a spurt, and let’s get to that heap, or they’ll be down upon us before we’re half-way to the shed. Run!”

They did run, with all their might; but out on the open veldt distances are horribly deceiving, especially in the early morning light, and to the despair of the fugitives the Boers came rapidly nearer, while the clump of earth for which they made seemed to be as distant as ever. The only thing they made out was that it became more diffused, and they plainly saw that it was a long ridge of earth freshly thrown up, evidently from a ditch beyond.

“Why, it’s a long rifle-pit,” cried Ingleborough. “Run, lad, run; we must do it now!”

But the pursuing Boers were coming on fast, and the fugitives felt that in a minute or so they would be overtaken.

There was something, though, in their favour, for as the enemy converged upon them the firing from a distance ceased, those who were using their rifles fearing to hit their own friends.

“It’s of no use; we can’t do it!” panted West, as Ingleborough, now that there was no need to try and diminish the mark at which the Boers fired, closed in again.

“Not two hundred yards away now!” said Ingleborough hoarsely.

“Let’s turn and have a couple of shots at them!” cried West.

“No: we should be bound to miss. Run, run!”

It was not the distance but the pace that was killing, and Ingleborough was right. To have stopped and turned to fire, with their pulses throbbing, breath coming in a laboured way, every nerve and muscle on the jump, must have resulted in missing; and the next moment the enemy would have ridden over them and they would have been either shot or prisoners.

Knowing this, they tore on till the rifle-pit was only a hundred yards away.

The foremost Boers spread out like a fan not fifty yards distant, and came on at full gallop, with the result appearing certain that before the fugitives had torn on despairingly another score of yards their enemies would be upon them.

“My despatch!” groaned West to himself, and then aloud: “Halt! Fire!”

True to his comrade in those despairing moments, Ingleborough obeyed the order, stopped short, swung round, and following West’s example, he was in the act of raising his rifle to his shoulder with his quivering hands, when—

Crack, cracky crack, crack, crack, crack, half-a-dozen flashes and puffs of smoke came from over the ridge of the low earthwork in front, emptying four saddles, while one horse went down headlong, pierced from chest to haunch by a bullet, and the fleeing pair saw the rest of their pursuers open out right and left, to swing round and gallop away back, pursued by a crackling fire which brought down six more before they were out of range.

Meanwhile twice over the big gun from its earthwork far away sent a couple of shells right over the fugitives’ heads on their way to the beleaguered town, and a few seconds later a cheery English voice had shouted: “Cease firing!” Then a dozen men came hurrying out of the rifle-pit where they had lain low, to surround the exhausted pair.

“Hands up!” shouted their leader loudly. “Who are you—deserters?”

“Deserters!” cried West hoarsely, as he pressed his left hand upon his breast and let his rifle fall to the ground. “Despatch—Kimberley—Water—for Heaven’s sake—help!”

He sank upon his knees, for everything seemed to be swimming round him before he became quite blind.

But he could hear still as he swooned away, and what he heard was a hearty British cheer.

Chapter Thirty.

At the Goal.

“It has more than paid for it all!” said West that night, when they lay down to rest after a wildly-exciting day.

“Yes,” replied Ingleborough, laughing. “I felt quite jealous!”

“I don’t believe you!” said West sharply. “You couldn’t; they all made as much fuss over you as they did over me, from the chief downward!”

“Well, I suppose they did; but I began to have the horrors once!”

“Horrors?”

“Yes; knowing as I did that they must be short of food, I began to think that they were welcoming us so warmly because we were something good to eat, and all the feasting was the beginning of fattening us up.”

“Of course you did!” said West drily.

“I say though,” continued Ingleborough; “if it is not a state secret, what was it the chief said to you when he took you aside?”

“Oh, it’s no secret from you!” replied West.

“Let’s have it then!”

“Well, first of all, it was a lot of flattery.”

“Flattery?”

“Yes, about being so brave, and bringing the Kimberley despatch through the Boer lines.”

“That was not flattery. You did bring the despatch to its destination very bravely.”

“So did you!” said West sharply.

“Oh, very well, so did I then! It was *we* if you like! Being buttered is not an unpleasant sensation when you can honestly believe that you deserve it; and, without being vain, I suppose we can feel that our consciences are at rest.”

“Never mind that!” said West hurriedly. “I don’t like being buttered, as you call it. The chief said then that he should have to send another despatch back to Kimberley, and that he should ask us to take it.”

“What a cracker!” cried Ingleborough.

“Cracker—lie? I declare he did!”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Very well!” said West stiffly.

“No; it is not very well! Come now, he didn’t say anything about *us*. He said you. Confess: the truth!”

West began to hesitate.

“He—well—perhaps not exactly in the words I said.”

“That will do, sir!” cried Ingleborough. “You are convicted of cramming—of making up a fictitious account of the interview. He did not allude to me.”

“But he meant to include you, of course!”

“No, he did not, Noll; he meant you.”

“I say he meant both of us. If he did not, I shan’t go!”

“What!”

“I shall not go a step out of the way without my comrade!”

“What!” cried Ingleborough, holding out his hand. “Well, come, I like that,

lad, if you mean it."

"If I mean it, Ingle!" said West reproachfully.

"All right, old chap! You always were a trump! There, *we'll* take the despatch back! And now no more butter! We're very brave fellows, of course, and there's an end of it. I say, I wonder how Anson is getting on."

"The miserable renegade!" cried West. "I should like to see the scoundrel punished!"

"Well, have patience!" said Ingleborough, laughing. "It's a very laudable desire, which I live in hopes of seeing gratified. But don't you think we might as well go to sleep and make up for all we have gone through?"

"Yes, but who is to sleep with all this terrible bombarding going on?"

"I for one!" said Ingleborough. "I'm getting quite used to it! But I say, I can see a better way of making a fortune than keeping in the diamond business."

"What is it?" said West carelessly. He was listening to the roar of the enemy's guns and the crash of shells, for the Boers were keeping up their bombardment right into the night.

"I mean to go into the gunpowder trade, and—oh dear, how—"

West waited for the words that should have followed a long-drawn yawn, but none came, for the simple reason that Ingleborough was fast asleep.

Ten minutes later, in the face of his suggestions to the contrary, and in spite of the steady regular discharge of artillery, sending huge shells into the place, West was just as fast asleep, and dreaming of Anson sitting gibbering at him as he played the part of a monkey filling his cheeks with nuts till the pouches were bulged out as if he were suffering from a very bad attack of mumps. The odd part of it was that when he took out and tried to crack one of the nuts in his teeth he could not, from the simple fact that they were diamonds.

Chapter Thirty One.

Bad for one: Good for two.

“It’s a bad job—a very bad job,” said West, with a sigh, as he mounted one of the pair of very excellent ponies that had been provided for the despatch-riders by the gallant chief in command at Mafeking, with the laughing comment that the two brave little animals ought to consider themselves very lucky in being provided with two such masters, who would take them right away from the beleaguered town, where, if they stayed, their fate was bound to be that they would be minced into sausages or boiled down into soup.

They were two beautiful little beasts; but West always sighed and said it was a bad job whenever he mounted, for his heart was sore about the pony he had lost before they entered Mafeking.

“I say, young fellow,” said Ingleborough, with one of his grim smiles: “how much longer are you going to stay in mourning?”

“Stay in mourning?” said West, staring, as he bent forward to pat his mount’s back.

“Yes: for those two ponies we lost; because it seems to me very absurd! To begin with, it’s downright folly to bemoan the loss of one pony when you have been provided with another equally good; secondly, it is more absurd to bemoan a pony at all; and thirdly, it is the most absurd thing of all to be mourning for one that in all probability is not dead.”

“Oh, they’re both dead enough by this time!” said West bitterly.

“Mine may be, for it was hit; but from the way it reared up and kicked out it had no bones broken, and these Basuto ponies are such hardy little beasts that I daresay it got better; while yours was so good that you may depend upon it some Boer has it nipped tightly between his legs, and is making the most of it.”

“I hope you are right!” said West. “And there, I will not mourn for them, as you call it, any more, but make the best of things. Let’s see; this is the

sixth day out from Mafeking."

"Seventh," said Ingleborough correctively.

"Of course; so it is, but I lose count through being so intent upon the one idea of getting back to Kimberley. Do you think we shall manage to get through the Boer lines?"

"Think? Why, we've got to get through them. We shouldn't be long if we could only ride straight away, and not be always running right on to some fresh party who begin to make game of us directly."

"That's rather an ambiguous way of speaking, Ingle," said West, laughing, as he caressed his pony. "If anybody else heard you he would think you meant that the Boers bantered and chaffed us."

"But nobody else does hear us, and you think that I mean that they begin to pump out bullets at us just as if we were a pair of springboks. I say, I'm beginning to think that we are leading a charmed life, for it is wonderful what escapes we have had from their long-carrying rifles."

"I'm beginning to think in a much more matter-of-fact way," replied West; "and I think this, that five hundred yards' range is quite long enough for any rifle used on active service. I know that when one takes aim beyond that distance one is very doubtful of hitting."

"I feel so after half that distance," replied Ingleborough, and then: "Hullo! See something?"

"Yes; I thought we were going to have a good long ride in peace this morning, but look yonder!"

The two young men drew rein and leaped to the ground, each hurriedly getting out his glass, for the commandant at Mafeking had supplied them with fresh ones, to steady it by resting it upon the saddle he had just quitted, their well-trained ponies standing perfectly motionless.

"What do you make of it?" said Ingleborough, scanning a mistily-seen dark line right away beneath the sun.

“Wagons trekking,” replied West quietly.

“Friends?”

“Who can say? I think not. Reinforcements and stores on the way to the besiegers, I should think.”

“I’m afraid you are right! Well, we had better let the nags feed while we lie down and watch, for I don’t think they have seen us yet.”

“Very well,” said West. “I’m tired of so much running away!”

The next minute they were lying amongst some stones and their ponies grazing, Ingleborough coolly filling his pipe and lighting it with a burning-glass, but keeping a watchful eye upon the long train of wagons and horsemen plodding along at the customary rate of about two miles an hour, and ready at any moment to spring upon his pony in case a party of the enemy should make up their minds to try and drive in the two ponies when they caught their eye.

This he knew was doubtful, for it was beginning to be a common sight upon the veldt—that of a wounded or worn-out horse or two picking up a scanty living from the grass and green points of the shrubs, while an investigation generally proved that the poor brutes were not worth the trouble of the ride.

Still, on the other hand, the suspicious nature of the Boers might prompt them to see whether riders were near the grazing animals, and an opportunity for capturing a prisoner or two be theirs.

The pair kept a keen look-out; but it seemed for a long time that they were to be left in peace, the long line of wagons and horsemen plodding steadily onward, completely blocking the way the bearers of the Kimberley despatch had to take.

At last, though, just after West had expressed his opinion that the Boers were too intent upon getting their heavy guns on towards Mafeking, Ingleborough, unnoticed by his companion, made a sudden movement, dropping his pipe and altering the small lenses of his field-glass, through which he lay gazing, supporting himself upon his elbows.

“Hah!” said West, who was similarly occupied; “they’ve got four heavy guns and a tremendous lot of stores. Wouldn’t one of our generals give something to have his men so arranged that he could cut them off in all directions! The country is so open, and not a kopje in sight. What a prize those guns would be!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough sharply; “but there is no British force at hand, so they are going to surround us instead.”

“What!” cried West excitedly.

“That they are, and no mistake!” continued Ingleborough, slewing himself round so as to look in a different direction.

“You don’t mean—oh, Ingle! Three strong bodies coming from behind, north and south. Why, we’re trapped!”

“We are, my lad; for here they come from the front.”

West turned his glass again in the direction of the long line of wagons after his look round, to see that a party of the Boers were riding out straight for them.

“Trapped; but we must dodge between the wires, eh?” cried West, who, like his companion, had made at once for where his pony was grazing. “Hah! Look out, Ingle!”

Ingleborough was looking out, but left helpless. West had caught his pony, but his companion had startled the other by the suddenness of his approach, and, throwing up its head, the little animal cantered off with his rider after him.

“Stop, stop!” shouted West. “You only scare the brute more.”

“Right!” said Ingleborough sadly, and he stopped short and began to return. “There!” he cried, as West sprang into his saddle; “you have the despatch. Off with you through that opening! I won’t hinder you! I’ll turn prisoner again for a change.”

“Lay hold of my pony’s tail and run! I’ll keep him to a canter, and change

with you as soon as you're tired!" said West, scanning the opening between the end of the Boer line and the party of horsemen away to his left who were making straight for them, lying towards the middle of the line, where the big guns were being dragged along.

"No good!" said Ingleborough. "Off with you, and save your despatch!"

"Can't leave you, old fellow! Do as I tell you!" cried West. "Hook on!"

"I will not! They won't kill me if I throw up my hands! Save your despatch if you can!"

"Obey orders, sir!" roared West fiercely, "and don't waste time! I'm going to trot after your mount, and he'll join us."

"Hah! Bravo, sharp brains!" cried Ingleborough excitedly, and twisting the long thick hair of the pony's tail about his left hand he ran lightly after his companion, the pony West rode uttering a shrill neigh as they went off, which made the other stop, cock up its ears, answer, and come galloping after them, so eager to join its fellow that it brushed close past Ingleborough, who caught the rein without trouble.

"Right!" he shouted, and the next minute he was in the saddle, with the ponies cantering along side by side.

"More to the left!" cried West. "The Boers are bearing away to cut us off!"

This was plain enough, and the fugitives saw that if a fresh party started from the end of the long line they were bound to be cut off.

"Never mind," cried Ingleborough; "we may get away! Those fellows are quite a mile from us, and their mounts will be pumped out if they push forward like that. Easy, easy! Let the ponies go their own pace!"

Settling down into a canter, the fugitives now began to look away to their left, where they had seen the other parties closing them in from their flank and rear.

"Hallo! Where's the rest of the enemy?" cried West.

“Yonder, out of sight! The ground lies lower there; but I say, these fellows are coming on at a tremendous rate! Gallop or they’ll cut you off.”

“Then we’ll gallop!” cried West. “We, old fellow! Just as if I were going to leave you behind!”

“Very nice of you,” said Ingleborough merrily; “but you’re not fit for a despatch-rider. You’re about the worst I ever knew of!”

“Because I won’t forsake a friend?”

“Friend be hanged! There’s no friendship in wartime. Ah, here come some of the flankers.”

“Yes, I see them,” said West; “but what does this mean?”

For all at once the galloping party on their right—that which had come straight from the centre of the Boer line—began to pull up until all were halted in the middle of the plain.

“They see their companions coming,” said Ingleborough, “and that we are safely cut off. Well, it is giving us a better chance!”

“But they’re turning and folding back,” cried West excitedly. “Here come the others, full gallop! Look, look, how they’re opening out! Gallop full speed now! No, no. Look, look! Why, Ingle, those are not rifles they’re carrying—they’re lances.”

“You’re dreaming!” growled Ingleborough. “Never mind what they’re carrying; they’re going to cut us off, and we’ve got to save that despatch!”

“And we shall save it too!” cried West, his voice sounding full of exultation. “Those are our Lancers—a regiment of them!”

“You’re right!” cried Ingleborough excitedly now, and he began to draw rein. “Look at the Boer line. There’s proof! They’re turning back from the front and hurrying up their rear so as to form laager round their big guns. Hurrah!” he yelled, rising in his stirrups to wave his hat.

“And hurrah a hundred times more!” yelled West, following his

companion’s example, as he saw now in no less than four directions little clouds of horsemen moving over the widely-spreading plain.

The next minute they had their glasses out and were watching the Boers—a line no longer, but broken up into what at first seemed to be wild confusion, out of which order began to form, for whoever was in command of the reinforcements on their way to Mafeking possessed enough soldierly knowledge of what was the best thing to be done under the circumstances. As the wagons in front were wheeled round to retire upon the centre formed by the four heavy guns, and those from the rear were hurried up to join in making a great square, cloud after cloud of mounted men galloped forward to seize upon any patch of shelter to hold against the advancing British force.

“It’s well meant,” said Ingleborough, without taking his eyes from his glass; “but they will not have time to form a strong laager. Why, our men will be among them before a quarter of an hour is past.”

“Before ten minutes!” cried West, in wild excitement. “Hurrah! Trapped this time! Look right across the laager; there are men coming on there!”

It was so, and Ingleborough cheered wildly again. For the British general must have had abundant information of the coming convoy, and had taken his precautions and made his plans so accurately as to timing the advance that he had completely surrounded the long line with cavalry and mounted infantry, who now raced for the laager, heedless of the fire opened upon them by the Boers. The enemy only fired a few shots, and then, finding themselves taken in front, flank, and rear, made for their horses and took flight in every direction, but not before the Lancers got among them and dotted the veldt with horse and man.

The Boer commander and those with gun and wagon worked well, bringing their heavy guns to bear on the main advance; but they were not directed at masses of men in column or line, but at a cloud of cavalry covering the plain and mingled with the enemy’s own flying horse, so that before a second discharge could be belched forth from the two large guns which were re-loaded, the Lancers, Hussars, and Volunteer Light Horse were among the gunners, and it was every man for himself, *sauve qui peut*.

West and Ingleborough were so intent with their glasses, watching the utter rout of the Boers, that they did not see a body of Lancers bearing down upon them at a gallop, and the noise of the scattered firing kept up by the Boers drowned the trampling of hoofs, till there was a shout which made the two despatch-bearers start round in their saddles, to see a dozen sun-browned, dust-covered Lancers galloping at them with weapons levelled, headed by a young officer waving them on with his flashing sword.

“Up hands!” yelled Ingleborough, and glass and hat were thrust on high.

It was only just in time, the officer raising his sword as he reined up by West and caught his arm.

“Hallo!” he roared, as his men surrounded the pair with lances at their breasts; “who are you?”

“Despatch-riders—Mafeking to Kimberley,” cried West.

“Where are your despatches then?” cried the officer sharply.

“Here!” cried West.

“Yah!” cried the young officer. “I thought I’d caught two Boer generals directing the fight. What a jolly sell!”

“You’ve got something better among you!” said Ingleborough, joining in the laugh which rose among the men.

“Have we? What?”

“There are four heavy guns yonder, and a tremendous wagon train.”

At that moment trumpet after trumpet rang out, and the men burst into a wild cheer, for the mounted Boers were scattering in all directions, flying for their lives, and it was plain enough that a tremendous blow had been inflicted upon a very strong force, the capture of the convoy being complete, and those in charge who had not succeeded in reaching their horses readily throwing down their arms.

“We’ll, we’ve whipped!” said the young officer of Lancers, taking off his helmet to wipe his streaming face. “They can’t find fault with us at home for this, my lads! Here, open out; we must join in driving these ragged rascals back on the centre. Here, you two,” he cried, turning to West and his companion, “I must take you both in to my chief, for I don’t know that I ought to take your bare word.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s much of the Dopper about either of us.”

“No,” said the officer, “but the Boers have got the scum of Europe and America with them, and you may be two little bits.”

“Want our rifles?” said West coolly.

“No; but don’t try to bolt, either of you: it would be dangerous. My boys are rather handy with the lance!”

“So I see!” said West, glancing at the points glistening at the tops of the bamboo shafts, several of which looked unpleasantly red.

“And so I felt,” said Ingleborough grimly, “for one of them pressed my ribs.”

Chapter Thirty Two.

Down by the Spruit.

The trumpets were ringing out again to call the various parts of the force together, a couple of regiments being sent in pursuit of the only body of the defeated Boers which showed any cohesion, the greater part of those who had reached their horses and escaped doing this to a great extent singly, and the rest of that day was passed in gathering in the wagons, disarming the prisoners, and making all secure in the laager, which was now formed about a spruit that offered an ample supply of good fresh water.

The capture proved to be far greater than was at first surmised, for in addition to the four heavy guns with their wagons and special

ammunition, scores of the great lumbering Dutch wagons were full of rifles and cartridges. Besides these, there was an ample supply of ordinary stores, and, in addition to the many spans of oxen, hundreds of captured horses and several flocks of sheep.

By night all was made secure in the great camp, and the despatch-riders were made welcome at the mess presided over by the cavalry General, who with his staff eagerly listened to the adventurers' account of their journey, and to their report of the state of beleaguered Mafeking.

That night the pair slept in peace in the well-guarded camp after debating about their continuance of their journey the next morning.

But when morning came the General demurred to letting them go.

"You must wait a day longer," he said, "until my boys have done more, to clear the way, for your road must be full of revengeful Boers, the remains of the force we defeated yesterday, and I am certain that neither you nor your despatch would reach Kimberley if I let you go!"

"We are very anxious to be off, sir," said West, in a disappointed tone.

"And I am very anxious that the Kimberley people should have your good news, my lad," said the general, smiling, "and the news too of how we have taken the guns and stores meant to be used against Mafeking; but, as I have told you before, I don't want the news you are to carry to be found somewhere on the veldt, perhaps a year hence, along with some rags and two brave young fellows' bones."

"Thank you, sir," said West quietly; "but when do you think we might continue our journey?"

"That depends on the reports I get in from the men still away in pursuit."

The men in camp were in high glee, for they had been struggling hard for weeks to get to conclusions with the enemy, but without success, while now their highest expectations had been more than fulfilled; but there was plenty of sorrow to balance the joy, many poor fellows having met their end, while the number of injured in the hospital ambulances and tents made up a heavy list.

West and Ingleborough saw much of this, and spent no little time in trying to soften the pangs endured by the brave lads who lay patiently bearing their unhappy lot, suffering the agony of wounds, and many more the miseries of disease.

There was trouble too with the prisoners, and West and his companion were present when a desperate attempt to escape was made by a party worked upon by one of their leaders—a half-mad fanatical being whose preachings had led many to believe that the English conquerors were about to reduce the Boers to a complete state of slavery.

The attempt failed, and the leader was one of those who fell in the terrible encounter which ensued.

Both West and Ingleborough were witnesses of the resulting fight, for the attempt was made in broad daylight, just when such a venture was least expected, and, after those who seized upon a couple of score of the captured horses and tried to gallop off had been recaptured, the young men worked hard in helping to carry the wounded to the patch of wagons that formed the field hospital.

“Ugh!” said West, with a shudder, after he and Ingleborough had deposited a terribly-injured Boer before one of the regimental surgeons; “let’s get down to the spruit and wash some of this horror away.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, after a glance at his own hands; “we couldn’t look worse if we had been in the fight! Horrible!”

“It’s one thing to be in the wild excitement of a battle, I suppose,” said West; “but this business after seems to turn my blood cold.”

Ingleborough made no reply, and the pair had enough to do afterwards in descending the well-wooded, almost perpendicular bank to where the little river ran bubbling and foaming along, clear and bright.

“Ha!” sighed West; “that’s better! It was horrible, though, to see those poor wretches shot down.”

“Um!” murmured Ingleborough dubiously. “Not very! They killed the sentries first with their own bayonets!”

“In a desperate struggle for freedom, though! But there, I’m not going to try and defend them!”

“No, don’t, please!” said Ingleborough. “I can’t get away from the fact that they began the war, that the Free State had no excuse whatever, and that the enemy have behaved in the most cruel and merciless way to the people of the towns they have besieged.”

“All right! I suppose you are right; but I can’t help feeling sorry for the beaten.”

“Feel sorry for our own party then!” said Ingleborough, laughing. “Why, Noll, lad, we must not holloa till we are out of the wood. This last is a pretty bit of success; but so far we have been horribly beaten all round.”

“Yes, yes; don’t talk about it,” said West sharply; “but look over there. We needn’t have been at the trouble of scrambling down this almost perpendicular place, for there must be a much easier spot where that fellow is walking up.”

“Never mind; we’ll find that slope next time, for we shall have to come down again if we want a wash.”

They sat down chatting together about the beautifully peaceful look of the stream, while Ingleborough lit his pipe and began to smoke.

“It does seem a pity,” said Ingleborough thoughtfully, exhaling a cloud of smoke: “this gully looks as calm and peaceful as a stream on old Dartmoor at home. My word! I wish I had a rod, a line, and some flies! There must be fish here. I should like to throw in that pool and forget all about despatch-bearing and guns and rifles and men using lances. It would be a treat!”

“It looks deep and black too in there,” said West. “Yes, a good day’s fishing in such a peaceful—Ugh! Come away. Let’s get back to the camp.”

“Why? What’s the matter?” cried Ingleborough, starting up, in the full expectation of seeing a party of the enemy making their way down the farther bank to get a shot at them.

But West was only pointing with averted head down at the deep black pool, and Ingleborough's face contracted as his eyes took in all that had excited West's horror and disgust.

For there, slowly sailing round and round just beneath the surface, were the white faces of some half-dozen Boers, wounded to the death or drowned in their efforts to escape the British cavalry, and washed down from higher up by the swift stream, to go on gliding round and round the pool till a sudden rising of the waters from some storm should give the stream sufficient power to sweep them out.

Chapter Thirty Three.

That Base Coin.

"Let's see; this will take us round by the hospital wagons," said Ingleborough. "I vote we go round the other way, for we don't want any more horrors now!"

They chose a different direction to return to their temporary quarters in the camp, one which took them round by the row upon row of captured wagons and the roughly-made enclosure into which the prisoners had now been herded, and where they were doubly guarded by a strong party of mounted infantry, who had stringent orders to fire at the slightest sign of trying to escape.

"They'll accept their lot now, I expect," said Ingleborough. "Who are these with this next lot of wagons? Non-combatants, I suppose!"

"Yes; drivers of the provision wagons and traders," replied West. "Why, that's the man we saw going up out of the spruit."

"Yes," said Ingleborough, and as he spoke West noted that the man who had been seated at the front of one of the wagons suddenly turned his back and walked round to the other side.

West turned to Ingleborough.

Ingleborough turned to West.

They stood looking enquiringly in each other's eyes for a few moments before the latter said suddenly:

"Which way will you go?"

"Left," said Ingleborough.

"And I'll go right."

They started at once, walking towards the wagon that had taken their attention, Ingleborough making for the front where the man had disappeared, and which necessitated passing the team of bullocks crouching down to ruminate over the fodder that had been cut for them, while West hurried round by the rear, the young men timing themselves so exactly that they met after seeing a pair of stout legs disappear between the fore and hind wheels of the wagon where the man they sought to face had dived under.

Quick as thought, West and Ingleborough separated and ran back lightly and quickly, this time to come upon the man they sought just as he was getting heavily upon his legs again, evidently in the belief that he had not been recognised.

He was thoroughly roused up to his position, though, by Ingleborough's heavy hand coming down upon his shoulder and hoisting him round to face the pair.

"Hallo, Anson!" cried Ingleborough banteringly; "this is a pleasant surprise!" while West's eyes flashed as he literally glared in the cowardly scoundrel's face, which underwent a curious change as he glanced from one to the other, his fat heavy features lending themselves to the dissimulation, as he growled out slowly: "Don't understand."

"What!" cried Ingleborough, in the same bantering tone; "don't you know this gentleman—Mr Oliver West?"

"Don't understand!" was the reply, and directly after: "Goodnight, Englishmen; I'm going to sleep!"

The next moment the heavy-looking fellow had turned his back again, stepped to the front part of the wagon, and sprawled over part of the wood-work as he tried to draw himself on to the chest before getting inside.

But Ingleborough was a strong man, and he proved it, for, stepping behind the man, he caught him by the collar of his jacket and the loose part of his knicker-bocker-like breeches, and dragged him off the wagon, to plant him down in front of West.

The result was that their prisoner began to rage out abusive words in Dutch, so loudly that in the exasperation he felt, Ingleborough raised his right foot and delivered four kicks with appalling vigour and rapidity—appalling to the receiver, who uttered a series of yells for help in sound honest English, struggling the while to escape, but with his progress barred by West, who closed up and seized him by the arm.

The outcry had its effect, for the called-for help arrived, in the shape of a sergeant and half-a-dozen men, who came up at the double with fixed bayonets.

“What’s all this?” cried the sergeant sharply, as he surrounded the party.

“Only a miracle!” cried Ingleborough. “This so-called Boer, who could not speak a word of English, has found his tongue.”

“What are you, prisoner—a Boer?” cried the sergeant.

“Ah, yah, yah,” was the reply, gutturally given; “Piet Retif, Boer.”

“Well, sir, orders are that the Boer prisoners are not to be ill-used,” said the sergeant. Then, turning to the prisoner: “This your wagon and span?”

“Ah, yah, yah, Piet Retif.”

“He says Yah, yah, sir,” said the sergeant, “which means it is his wagon.”

“Oh yes, it is his, I believe,” said Ingleborough.

“Then what have you against him?”

“Only that he’s a renegade Englishman, a man who deserted from Kimberley to the Boers.”

“It’s a lie, sergeant,” cried the man excitedly.

“That’s good English,” cried Ingleborough. “I told you I had worked a miracle; now perhaps I can make him say a little more. He’s an illicit-diamond merchant and cheat as well, and his name is not Piet Retif, but James Anson, late clerk to the Kimberley Company. What do you say, West?”

“The same as you,” replied West.

“It is a lie!” cried the man. “Piet Retif, dealer in mealies and corn.”

“Mealies and corn!” cried Ingleborough scornfully. “The man is what I say: an utter scoundrel, cheat, and, worse than all, a renegade and deserter to the Boers.”

Anson’s jaw dropped, and his face seemed to turn from a warm pink to green.

Chapter Thirty Four.

Another Start.

Before Anson’s jaw had time to return to its place the sergeant and his men sprang up to attention, looking as stiff as if on parade.

West was the first to see the reason, and he nudged Ingleborough, just as a stern voice asked what was wrong.

“Bit of a row, sir, between the two despatch-riders and this prisoner, sir,” replied the sergeant. “Prisoner charges these two gentlemen with assaulting him. Says he’s a Boer!”

The new-comer, who had four officers in attendance upon him during what was apparently a tour of inspection of the camp, turned sharply on

the two friends.

“I cannot have the prisoners ill-treated,” he said. “Why is this?”

“Because he is not a Boer, sir,” said Ingleborough sharply. “This man was in the company’s office with us at Kimberley. He is little better than a thief, or worse, for he is a receiver of stolen goods, an Englishman, an illicit buyer of diamonds, and a renegade who gave information to and deserted to the Boers.”

“That will do,” said the General. “Half of your charges would condemn him. Sergeant, see that this prisoner is carefully guarded. He will be tried later on. I am too busy to attend to such matters now.”

Anson gave vent to a gasp, after listening to the general’s orders for his safe custody.

But, though he was listening to the orders given, his eyes were otherwise employed. They were half-closed, but fixed intently upon West, and they did not quit his face till the sergeant clapped him on the shoulder, saying: “Now, Mr Piet Retif, this way!”

Then he started violently, and was marched off to be placed with certain of the prisoners who were the most carefully guarded.

“Did you notice anything in particular just before Anson was led off?” said Ingleborough.

“No. Poor wretch. I’m sorry for him!”

“Keep your sorrow for a more worthy object, my lad, and mind and give that fellow a wide berth if ever he gets his liberty again.”

“Which he will, of course.”

“Well, perhaps so, for the Company can’t give the diamond-buyer all they would like! But when he does get free, you be careful!”

“Why, what harm can he do me?”

“Can’t say,” said Ingleborough abruptly; “but something or another ill you may take it for granted he will do. I’ve been watching his face, and read what it means! Of course, he doesn’t like me, for I’ve been fighting against him all along; but somehow he seems to hate you, and, mark my words, he’ll try his best to do you a mischief! He gives you the credit of being the cause of all this trouble!”

“But I’ve not been!” said West.

“No; I’ve done the scoundrel ten times the mischief that you have, for I disliked him from the very first day we met. He was too oily for me, and I always thought that he would turn out a bad one. I’m the culprit, but he means to let me alone and to take all the change out of you! That’s all—only don’t give him a chance!”

“Not I; but we shall not see much more of him, I suppose.”

“What? There’ll be a trial in a day or two, and I’ve got a pill for my gentleman.”

“What do you mean—not a lead pill?”

“Tchah! Nonsense. I mean to ask for the scoundrel’s wagon to be searched. I was afraid they would let him go back to it.”

“The wagon? Of course,” said West thoughtfully. “I had forgotten that.”

The young men’s eyes met as if they were trying to read each other’s thoughts; but no more was said then, and the next morning West and Ingleborough were summoned to the General’s wagon.

“Good morning,” said the officer sharply. “Your despatches are, of course, very important, and it is urgent that they should be delivered at once?”

“Yes, sir,” said West eagerly. “Then we may go on at once?”

The General smiled.

“No,” he replied; “all through the night scouts and natives have been coming in, and in general from different sources one has a great variety

of news; but in this case, coming from parts widely asunder, I get the same announcement. Stung by the defeat I have given them and the loss of their convoy and big guns, they have been collecting in great force, evidently to try and surround me in turn and recover all they have lost."

"Then we had better make a dash for it at once, sir, before the way is completely closed," said West.

"The way is completely closed, young man," said the General gravely. "East, west, north, and south, there are strong commandos with guns, and there is only one way open for you."

"And that is?" said West excitedly, for the General had stopped.

"By going nearly due west, and cutting your way through."

"Cutting our way through!" said West blankly, and he turned to look at Ingleborough for an explanation, but the latter only shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, you are both puzzled!" said the General, smiling. "You want to know how you are to cut your way through! I'll tell you: by keeping with me and letting my fellows clear the road for you!"

"But—" began West.

"There is no 'but' in the matter, sir," said the General. "You are both willing messengers; but you cannot do impossibilities. If you go on in your own way you will be either shot down or captured, and in either case your despatches will fall into the enemy's hands."

"Unless I destroyed them first!" said West bitterly.

"Of course. That is what you would try to do, my lad, if you had time. But as you would naturally defer that till the last extremity, the probabilities are that this necessary task would be left undone. Rifle-bullets fly very swiftly, and the Boers' traps are cleverly set, as our people are finding to their cost."

"But the despatches must be delivered, sir," said West excitedly, "and it is

my duty to go on at any risk!”

“And mine to do two things, young gentleman,” said the General, speaking very sternly. “One is, to assist you in the task you have in hand; the other, as I find that Kimberley is being hard pressed, to try and cut my way through to the help of the brave people who are holding it against great odds. Now, as the two objects work together, your way must be with us. I may not be able to force my way through, but I can certainly see you well on your way.”

“Then we are to stop with your cavalry brigade, sir?” said West, in disappointed tones.

“Certainly, as long as I am making a forward movement, which will commence at once. If I find it necessary to diverge from the course laid down, on account of the extent of the convoy I have captured and the number of prisoners, I shall give you fair warning, so that you may make a dash for yourselves. There, gentlemen, I am busy. You will attach yourselves to my staff, and help keep a watch over the loot in diamonds.”

Taking this to be a dismissal, the two young men retired to talk the matter over in their own quarters.

“I don’t like it!” said West excitedly. “We have our orders as to what we are to do about the despatch! Ought we to let a cavalry general override those instructions?”

“I suppose so,” replied Ingleborough. “Perhaps, after all, he is right.”

“Right?”

“Well, he knows from good information the state of the country, and we do not. It would be better for your despatch never to be delivered than for it to fall into the enemy’s hands.”

“Of course!”

“Then why not take matters as you find them? Are we not going to take news for our General over yonder, and reinforcements as well?”

“Yes, I hope so,” replied West; “but one does not like when one’s plans are made to have them interfered with.”

“Of course not,” said Ingleborough, laughing; “but we started with fixed plans from Kimberley, and we’ve been interfered with and baffled ever since.”

“But we did get the despatch to Mafeking!”

“Yes, even when it seemed quite hopeless; and we’re going to get the answer back to Kimberley yet.”

“I hope so,” said West gloomily.

“Bah! What a grumbler you are, Noll! Nothing seems to satisfy you! Haven’t we turned the tables completely upon that fat pink innocent?”

West nodded his head.

“Isn’t he prisoner instead of us?”

“Yes, that’s true!”

“And hasn’t he proved your innocence and his own guilt before those officers?”

“Yes, he has done that!” said West, with his puckered face smoothing out.

“Then just confess that you are a growling, discontented, hard-to-satisfy young humbug.”

“I do—frankly!” cried West, laughing outright.

“Come, that’s something; and I begin to think that I will forgive you and stick to you after all, instead of following out my own ideas.”

“Your own ideas?” said West, looking at his companion enquiringly. “What were those?”

“Well,” said Ingleborough, in his dry stolid manner; “Shakespeare was a very able man.”

“My dear Ingle,” cried West, staring, “whatever has Shakespeare got to do with your plans?”

“Everything, you young ignoramus. Doesn’t he say something about there being a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, will lead to fortune?”

“I believe so; but I wish he could point out the tide that would take our live barque safe into Kimberley.”

“Ah, but you see he does not; his works were written for people living in a wet country where there are plenty of rivers and seas. He didn’t know anything about the veldt, and, in fact, he was not very strong in his geography, or he wouldn’t have written about the sea coast of Bohemia.”

“There,” cried West, “you’re getting into one of your long-winded arguments, and I’m waiting to hear your plans!”

“Oh, they are only these!” said Ingleborough very gravely. “Being a poor man and seeing the tide at its height, I thought to myself that there could be no harm in annexing a rogue’s plunder when it is as plain as the nose on one’s face that we have as good a right to it as all the officers and Tommy Atkinses of this brigade. I came to the conclusion that I’d get you to stand in with me on fair halves principle, and go off with the diamonds in that barrel, calling at Kimberley as we go to leave that despatch, and then going on to the Cape, and then home.”

“No, you did not, Ingle,” said West quietly; “so don’t talk bosh! Look, they’re striking tents, inspanning, and getting off.”

“By George! so they are. And hallo! what does this mean—an attack?”

“A battery of Horse Artillery guns,” cried West. “Then we are going on in real earnest.”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, “and so our friends the Boers will find.”

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Net and the Fish.

The start was made more quickly than either West or Ingleborough had anticipated; in fact, the celerity was wonderful considering that the cavalry brigade was burdened with the great convoy of wagons captured from the Boers.

But there was a keen soldier in command, and one who knew how to be ready for every emergency likely to occur in an enemy's country.

As the two despatch-riders mounted their ponies, the cavalry regiments were in motion, some taking up ground in advance and on the flanks, while two more, a Lancer and a Dragoon regiment, stood fast ready for action as rear-guard, giving the six-gun battery an opportunity to off-saddle and rest their horses, fresh from a twelve-mile march that morning.

The wagon lines were in perfect order, steadily moving off after two of the big newly-captured guns, freshly manned by picked crews, the other two being reserved for the centre of the train and taking up their position easily enough, drawn as they were by double teams of sturdy ponies which made them far more mobile than would have been the case if trusted to the slow-moving oxen.

"They won't attempt to use those guns if we are attacked," said West, as he watched the preparations going on; "our men will be quite ignorant of how to work them."

"Our men will try if the necessity comes," said Ingleborough confidently; "and that's half the battle!"

"Yes," said West; "but it's hardly likely that the enemy will attack so well-armed a body of men."

"They will, though, and do us no end of mischief if they get the chance."

But the General for the first three days gave the enemy no chance, for he carefully avoided kopjes and broken ground, keeping out a cloud of mounted men scouting in every direction, and camping each night on the

banks of some spruit.

In fact, every military precaution was taken on defensive principles, for the captured convoy was too valuable for any risks to be run by attacking one or other of the commandos trying to hem in the brigade.

It was soon found that the Boers were in motion in front, rear, and on both flanks, awaiting an opportunity to swoop down and stampede sheep, cattle, and horses, spread confusion amongst the men, and so open up a chance to re-capture the guns and stores.

But no chances were given, for everything had been arranged, and during seven days' march West had a fine experience in the manoeuvring of a cavalry brigade. So, in fact, had the enemy, but theirs was at a bitter cost.

Finding that the British force would not attack any of the natural strongholds nor step into any of the traps contrived at river crossings where the perpendicular banks were filled with trench, pit, and shelter, but that the carefully-guarded convoy went on slowly towards safety day after day, the enemy became more daring, changed their tactics, and gathered together for attacks, getting their guns into action ready for their own captured artillery to be halted, and with a few well-directed shots at a tremendously long range to put the carefully planted guns out of action and compel a rapid retreat.

If they surrounded the convoy in their thousands with knots of mounted riflemen, there was a rush, a flying cloud of dust kicked up, and away went half the Horse Artillery battery to one knoll, the other half to another, and before the intention of the General could be grasped the shells were falling fast among those knots, bursting and untying them in an appalling way which littered the dry earth with dead horses and men; while, whenever a bolder dash than usual was made to capture either of the half-batteries, the Boers found that, mobile as they were, the British cavalry could nearly double them in swiftness of evolution, and Lancers and Hussars cut them up and sent them flying in every direction.

Day after day this went on, with the result that the reinforcements the enemy received were pretty well balanced by the constant dribbling away

of ambulance wagons loaded with wounded men.

“Isn’t it splendid?” Ingleborough kept on saying. “Why, we could go on journeying like this for months. I like this defensive game! Chess is nothing to it!”

“So do the Boers like a defensive game!”

“Yes,” said Ingleborough, laughing. “Did you hear what one of the Boers taken said to the officer in command of the prisoners’ guard?”

“No. I did not catch it; but I saw our men laughing. What was it?”

“He said our officers did not fight fair, and when our man asked him what he considered was fair fighting, the scoundrel gave him to understand that we ought to attack them when they were well entrenched in a kopje ready to shoot all our men down.”

“Well,” said West, “what did our officer say?”

“Laughed at him, and told him that if they were so very anxious to fire at targets we would arrange butts for them with a series of mantlets and a good supply of the Bisley Running Deer. But that wasn’t the best of it,” said Ingleborough, laughing; “what do you think the fellow said?”

“I don’t know,” said West, who was watching the evolutions of a couple of the Light Horse Volunteer regiments and as many of the Lancers, for, tired of the plodding life of keeping with the tremendous baggage train for a whole week, the two friends had ridden out in advance over a wide open series of rolling downs covered with dry scrubby growth, parched to greyness by the torrid sun.

Ingleborough laughed heartily for a few moments.

“There they go,” he said, pointing to the leading troop of the Hussar regiment as it disappeared over a ridge about a mile in advance. “Let’s make for that wave-like place.”

“Very well,” said West; “I suppose we shall be safe there!”

“Safe enough, of course, for our men have swept it clear! Forward! How the ponies enjoy a gallop! But I didn’t tell you what the miserable ruffian said.”

“No,” cried West, enjoying the motion as much as the ponies. “This is delightful after all that slow walking; but we had better turn back when we have seen what those fellows are about! Now, what did the Boer say?”

“Said he had always heard we were cowards at Majuba; now he knew for himself.”

“The insolent hound!” cried West. “What did our officer say?”

“That it was lucky for the Boer that he was a prisoner, for if he had been free he would have tasted a flogging from the flat of a sabre. But hullo! where are our men?” cried Ingleborough, as they reached the crown of the low ridge and looked down at a strip of open veldt, beyond which was another ridge.

“Gone over there!” said West quietly. “They must have galloped!”

“Shall we follow, and come back with them?” said Ingleborough.

“We may as well,” was the reply; “they must be trying to cut off some of the Boers.”

“Or going in for a charge to scatter them, for we want no more prisoners. Come on, then; I should like to see the charge!”

The ponies seemed to share their desire, for, answering a slight pressure on their flanks, they spread out and went down the slight slope like greyhounds, avoiding as if by instinct the holes and stones with which the veldt was dotted away in front.

“Steady, steady!” cried West. “We don’t want to overdo it!”

“Of course not,” shouted Ingleborough; “but my word, what delicious air, and what a place for a gallop! I should like to see a herd of antelope appear on that ridge to the left. I should be obliged to go after them; we might get one for the officers’ mess.”

“There they are, then!” cried West.

“Where?” said Ingleborough.

“Coming over that continuation of the ridge a mile away to the left. No: mounted men! Ingle, old chap,” cried West excitedly, “they’re the party our men have cut off! They’ve headed them, and they’re trying to escape by this opening!”

“By jingo! No!” cried Ingleborough. “Our men have gone off to the right, I believe, and those Boers have seen us. Noll, old fellow, we’ve come a bit too far. Steady! Right turn! Now off and away, or somebody else will be cut off or shot; perhaps both of us, for we’re in for it once more.”

“Oh no,” said West coolly; “be steady, and we’ll show the Boers how English fellows ride!”

“Yes, but hang it all! It’s showing the beggars how we ride away.”

“Never mind; we must ride for the convoy.”

“But we can’t,” cried Ingleborough savagely; “there’s another party cutting us off.”

“Forward then over the ridge in front! Our fellows must have gone over there.”

“No, I don’t think they did.”

“Then we will,” cried West excitedly; “that must be south and west. Forward for Kimberley; it can’t be far now; and let’s deliver the despatch.”

“Hold hard! Look before you leap!” shouted Ingleborough; and, rising in his stirrups, he gave a hasty glance round, to see Boers here, Boers there, in parties of from six to a dozen, spreading out as they came along at a gallop, forming more and more of a circle, till there was an opening only in one direction—to the south-west—and after grasping this fully he turned to West as he settled himself in his saddle.

“Why, Noll, lad,” he cried, “it’s like the drawing of a seine-net in Cornwall,

with us for the shoal of mackerel. They've got it nearly round us, and if we don't start, in another ten minutes we shall be enclosed. It looks fishy, and no mistake!"

"Then come on!" cried West.

"Off with you, but at a gentle gallop. We must nurse our nags, for the obstinate brutes will make it a long chase."

As he spoke he pressed his pony's sides, and away they went together at a long easy gallop, their mounts keeping so close together that the riders' legs nearly touched, and the brave little animals taking stride for stride and needing no guidance, the best management being to give them their heads and perfect freedom to avoid all the obstacles which came in their way in the shape of rock, bush, and the perilous holes burrowed in the soil by the South African representatives of our rabbits.

Once settled down in their saddles, with the opening in the Boer net straight before them, the fugitives had no difficulty in carrying on a conversation, and this ensued in the calmest matter-of-fact way concerning the predicament in which they had landed themselves.

"It's very awkward, Noll!" said Ingleborough.

"But, to use your favourite argument, it seems all for the best," replied West. "We can easily reach the open ground yonder before the enemy, and then ride right away."

"If," said Ingleborough.

"If they don't stop when they find us likely to go through the horns of the dilemma they have prepared for us."

"And lie down and begin shooting?"

"Exactly! Their bullets will go faster than our ponies!"

"Yes, but we shall put them at full speed, and they will find it hard to hit us at a gallop."

“I hope so!” said Ingleborough. “My word! How they are coming on!”

“Yes; but they will not get within five hundred yards of us!” cried West excitedly.

And so it proved, for as the horns of the partly-finished circle drew nearer, that nearness proved to be nearly a thousand yards from point to point, while half-way between, and with their ponies racing over the ground stretched out like greyhounds, the two despatch-riders dashed through, forcing the enemy to alter their course as they were left behind.

“That’s done it!” cried West joyously. “Now then for Kimberley; it can’t be very far away!”

“Sit close!” cried Ingleborough. “They’ll fire now if they can do so without hitting their friends.”

West glanced back to his right, and saw the truth of his companion’s words, for the next minute the firing was commenced on both sides, the bullets coming over their heads with their peculiar buzzing sound, and the dusty soil being struck up here and there as the fugitives tore along.

“This will put their shooting to the test!” cried West, leaning forward to pat his pony’s neck.

“Yes; it will puzzle the best of them!” replied Ingleborough. “I’m not afraid of their marksmen, but I am of the flukes. However, we’re in for it! Easy now! We’re getting more and more ahead as they close in. There, those behind are obliged to leave off firing for fear of hitting their friends.”

Ingleborough was right, for after another useless shot or two the firing ceased, and it became a chase where success, barring accidents, would rest with the best and freshest horses.

Knowing this, the fugitives eased their ponies all they could after placing a greater distance between them and their pursuers, but keeping a good look-out ahead and to right and left, knowing full well as they did that the appearance of fresh Boers ahead would be fatal to their progress.

Half an hour glided by, during which first one and then the other glanced

back, but always with the same result of seeing that some two or three dozen of the enemy were settled down to a steady pursuit.

“How long do you think they will keep this up?” said West at last.

“Well, if they are French mercenaries they’ll give up directly; if they are Germans they’ll stick to our heels for hours; but if they’re all Free Staters or Transvaal Boers they’ll go on till they drop or we do. The stubborn, obstinate mules never know when they are beaten!”

“Then they’re not French adventurers!” said West.

“Nor yet Germans!” said Ingleborough. “No; we’ve got the genuine Boer after us; and it’s going to be a long chase.”

“How far do you think it is to Kimberley?”

“Just as far as it is from Kimberley to here!” replied Ingleborough gruffly.

“Thank you for nothing!” snapped out West. “What’s the good of giving foolish answers?”

“What’s the good of asking foolish questions? Look here, lad, we may as well look the position in the face.”

“Of course.”

“Very well, then; we’ve got a score and a half or so of Boers after us, meaning to take us prisoners or shoot us down.”

“Oh yes, that’s plain enough!”

“Very well! Then as to distance to Kimberley, the General has dodged in and out so to avoid the enemy that, though I know a little about the country, I’m regularly puzzled as to where we are. I think it lies out here, but whether Kimberley is five miles away or a hundred I don’t know. What I do know is that the surest way of getting there is to make right away west for the railway. Once we can hit that—”

“Yes, I see, and if we keep it on our right, riding south, we shall get there.”

“That’s correct, my lad, but recollect this: we left the town invested, and you may depend upon it that the enemy are round it in greater strength than ever, so that how we are to get through their lines when we reach them I don’t know.”

“Neither do I!” said West. “But we did not know how we were to get into Mafeking! Still we did it, and we’re going to do this somehow.”

“Ah, somehow!”

“Look here,” said West, after another glance back at their pursuers: “do you think you could put matters in a blacker light if you were to try?”

“To be frank, old fellow,” said Ingleborough, laughing, “I really don’t think I could!”

“No more do I!”

“But look here: it’s as well always to look the blackest side full in the face. Then you know the worst at once, and can act accordingly. Hooray! One to us!” shouted Ingleborough, glancing back.

“What is it? I see one of the enemy broken down and another pulled up to help him. It’s two to us.”

“There, you see now the good of looking at the worst of it.”

“It’s quite cheering!” cried West.

“Not very, for the rest are making a spurt.”

“Let them!” said West. “Our ponies are full of go. We will not push them unless absolutely obliged.”

“Words of wisdom! A long, steady pace wins. Keep on; we can afford to lose a little ground, for we have been gaining for some time!”

Chapter Thirty Six.

Close Pursuit.

Hour after hour passed, and the chase continued over the wide rolling veldt, the fugitives making their course more and more westerly so as to hit the railway, hoping every time they reached the top of one of the wave-like ridges to find that they were close at hand.

But it was always the same—veldt, veldt, veldt, stretching on towards the horizon, with a village or farm once in a way, and the enemy always at the same distance behind, keeping doggedly on.

Twice over, though, the fugitives had scraps of encouragement from one of their pursuers pulling up, and in each case another drew rein and stopped with him.

At last a spruit was reached, with the fresh bubbling water tempting the escaping pair to alight in a way only to be understood by one who has been similarly situated.

It was just after the Boers had pulled up to let their horses walk after a long ascent, and they were still going on at the same pace, when West checked his pony.

“It’s of no use; we must drink,” he said. “Dismount, unsling your rifle, and get behind that stone and try and hold the enemy in check while I water the horses and fill the bottles.”

Ingleborough said nothing, only obeyed, and the next minute West was leading the ponies down to the shallow crossing, leaving his companion with his rifle-barrel resting upon the big stone that formed a natural breastwork.

Seeing that the pair had stopped, the Boers began to press forward, even after Ingleborough had fired twice; but the next shot made them pull up short, open out, and take up position, beginning to return the fire then.

A few minutes later the horses had had a good drink, the bottles were re-filled, and all was ready on the far side of the spruit for continuing the flight.

West shouted to his companion, who placed a block of stone about the size of his head upon the natural breastwork and fired twice, dropping down directly after and wading to the side of the gully, where he threw himself upon his breast, drank deeply, and then waded across to rejoin his companion. Then they were off again at a canter, getting a good quarter of a mile on their road before the Boers discovered by a careful flanking approach that they had given up their defence of the spruit and dashed on.

“They’ll be after us now at full speed!” said West, as he stood up in his stirrups gazing back.

“No,” said Ingleborough; “they’ll stop there, I daresay, for an hour to give their horses water and rest, thinking that they can lull us into the belief that they have given up the pursuit; and then they’ll come on again, following us steadily so as to trap us as soon as it is dusk.”

“I don’t think you are right,” said West; “but it is of no use to argue about it. We shall see!”

The day wore on and they saw nothing but the wide-spreading brown veldt, with no sign of the great river, no mountain ridge or other object familiar to Ingleborough during his travels through the country.

“No,” he said, in reply to a question from West, “I can’t make out anything, only that we are going south-west. The country is so big, you see. All I can say is that we must be going right. We’re making for the river, and we can’t do better. It may be many, many miles away still!”

“Well, let’s keep on. There’s one comfort: the enemy don’t seem to be after us.”

“No,” said Ingleborough, after a good look back, and speaking very drily; “they don’t seem to be, but I don’t trust them. They mean to run us down; but we’ll give them their work first.”

In this spirit the fugitives rode steadily on hour after hour till the evening came, and then there was nothing for it but to look out for some halting-place with cover and feed for the ponies.

“We can’t keep on without giving them a rest,” said Ingleborough; “for we may have to ride all day to-morrow.”

“What?” cried West. “You surely don’t think we’re so far off still?”

“I don’t know anything, lad,” replied Ingleborough; “for, as I said before, the country is so big, and it is quite possible that we may have two or three days’ journey before us yet.”

“But food—rest?” faltered West.

“My eyes are wandering everywhere in search of food,” replied Ingleborough, “and I keep on hoping to come upon a farmhouse somewhere in sight. That will mean food, either given, bought, or taken by threatening with our rifles. As to the rest, we’ll have that when we get into Kimberley.”

Night fell without a sign of spruit, pool, or farm; but it was a bright, clear time, with the stars giving them sufficient light to keep on in the hope that was growing desperate that they must soon come upon some stream. But they hoped in vain, and the ponies at last began to grow sluggish and indisposed to proceed whenever some patch of bush was reached in the midst of the dried-up expanse.

“There, it’s of no use,” said Ingleborough; “we may as well let the poor brutes browse upon such green shoots as they can find! They’ll be all the fresher for the halt. As for us, we must feed upon hope and the remembrance of the good things we have had in the past.”

“Don’t let’s give up yet!” replied West. “It is cool travelling, and every mile brings us nearer to safety.”

“Very well; but we shall find it hard work to get the ponies along.”

So they rode on, with their mounts growing more and more sluggish for a while, and then West suddenly uttered an exclamation.

“What is it?” cried Ingleborough. “Your nag?”

“Yes; he has suddenly begun to step out briskly.”

“So has mine,” said Ingleborough. “It’s all right. Give yours his head—they sniff water. I half fancy I can smell it myself; the air comes so cool and moist.”

Just then one of the ponies snorted, and the pair broke into a canter which lasted for about a quarter of a mile, when they dropped into a walk, for the ground was encumbered with stones; but almost directly a pleasant refreshing odour of moist greenery saluted the riders’ nostrils, and then the ground was soft and yielding beneath the ponies’ hoofs, then rough and gravelly, and the next minute the riders were gazing down at the reflected stars, which became blurred as the ponies splashed into water and then lowered their muzzles to drink.

“A great pool?” said West.

“No; hark!”

West listened, to hear the rippling trickle of running water.

“A river!” he said excitedly.

“Yes, and it may be the Vaal. If not, it will be one of the streams running into it.”

“And we must keep on this side and follow it down.”

“Well, no,” said Ingleborough, with a little laugh; “seeing that the Boers are after us, I think it will be safer to follow it down from the other side.”

“Very well! What shall we do—get down and wade?”

“I would rather keep dry,” replied Ingleborough. “Let’s wait till the ponies have drunk sufficient, and then try if it is safe enough for them to walk across. I think it will be, for you can hear how shallow it is!”

“Yes,” said West; “close in here; but what is it farther out?”

He stood up in his stirrups and followed the reflection of the stars for some distance.

“It’s a big river, Ingle,” he said, “and it would be madness to try and ford it in the dark.”

“Very well; let’s get a good drink as soon as the ponies have had their share, and then follow the river down till we come upon a place where they can graze and we can rest.”

This plan was followed out, the ponies being hobbled at a spot where there seemed to be plenty of feed, while amongst the dense bushes and rugged stones which barred their way a snug resting-place was soon found, where, after cautiously making their way down to the river bank and allaying their thirst, the fugitives lay down to rest, listening to the sound of falling water not far away. Then, in perfect forgetfulness of Boers, despatches, and all the dangers of their way, both dropped into the deep sleep produced by exertion—a sleep which lasted till the sun was once more beginning to flood the earth with light.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

Rough Work.

It was the sound of a deep breath which put an end to West’s slumber, and he opened his eyes to lie staring at two more, big, brown, soft, and peaceful-looking, not a foot away from his own.

It was some moments before full wakefulness came and he realised where he was, and that it was his pony, well-fed and rested, mutely asking him whether he was not going to mount and ride off again.

It was then that the thought of danger asserted itself, and he raised his head and looked sharply around, to see that they were amongst stones and bushes where; the bank went precipitously down to a beautiful winding river flowing amongst abundant verdure. Close by him lay Ingleborough, still fast asleep, and beyond him the other pony, still cropping away at the rich green growth which sprang up among the

stones. Then, as far as he could see, West made out nothing but the beauty of the spot upon which they had stumbled in the darkness of the night. He rose to his knees stiffly enough, and was in the act of getting upon his feet, realising that the beautiful greenery formed a riband on either side of the river, beyond which was the open veldt, when he dropped down again to reach out and grasp Ingleborough's shoulder, for in his rapid glance he had caught sight of a party of mounted men out in the full sunshine about half-a-mile away. They were walking their horses, and it seemed for certain to be the whole or a portion of the enemy of the previous day, for he recalled, what had not struck him at the time, that one of the Boers was mounted upon a grey horse, and one of the others he could see from where he watched was similarly mounted.

"Plenty of grey horses about, of course!" he muttered; "but this seems to be the one I saw yesterday."

"What's the matter?" said Ingleborough.

"Hist! Keep quiet!" replied West. "The Boers are upon us! Look!"

Ingleborough rose cautiously, took a long earnest look through his glass, and put it back.

"Yes, there they are," he said coolly; "there's that chap again on the white pony. Good job we didn't try to ford the river in the darkness. Why, we should have been swept away."

West glanced for a moment in the direction of the stream, and grasped the truth of his companion's words, before scanning their position and taking it in at once.

"We can't get over yonder," he said quickly.

"No," replied Ingleborough. "That cuts two ways. Neither can they attack us from that quarter; so our rear is safe."

"We shall not be able to escape north," continued West.

"No; we are shut in there."

“Nor yet south, for they would pick us off easily before we could get through the rough ground to gallop away.”

“Quite right, lad; and they are advancing on our front. Noll, my boy, there is only one thing to be done.”

“What is that?”

“Turn that patch of rocks there into our fort, and hold out till they’ve shot us down, or we’ve shot them, or they’ve made us surrender.”

“What about provisions?”

“Plenty of water,” said Ingleborough coolly, nodding towards the river.

“We’re nearly famished now.”

“Yes, lad! I certainly feel as if I could peck a bit of something if I had the chance. But come, there’s no time for talking. There’s a ready-made fort for us, and the next thing is to get the ponies into cover. I say, I was right! I knew that the enemy would stick doggedly to our trail till they ran us down.”

“Look here!” cried West: “I’m going to crawl to those rocks and try and cover you while you follow with the ponies.”

“No need,” replied Ingleborough; “the poor things have eaten till they can eat no more, and they’ll follow us right enough. Let’s try and get under cover before we are seen.”

West hesitated for a moment, for the thought arose that the Boer party might ride away and try to find a ford, but a glance showed him that in the brief period which had passed since he awoke and saw them the enemy were much nearer, and, following his companion’s example, he began to crawl on all-fours towards the clump of rocks pointed out, the horses quietly following them.

They had about fifty yards to go through a cover of bushes and lumps of rugged stone, but before they were half-way there West cried impatiently: “I don’t like it; the Boers must see the horses directly. Let’s mount and

make a dash for it."

"Very well!" replied Ingleborough quietly. "Perhaps it would be best!"

"Then as soon as you are up we must ride towards them till we are clear of these bushes, and then off we go to the right."

"Good; but it must be sharp work, for of course they will see us the moment we are up!" answered Ingleborough.

"We must risk it, Ingle," said West. "We never could keep them at bay. Let's have action: it would be horrible to be lying behind a rock with the sun beating down upon us. Now then, get hold of your rein!"

There was a few moments' pause while the pair crept alongside of their ponies. Then West drew a deep breath and cried: "Mount!"

As he uttered the word he glanced over his pony's back at the advancing enemy, and saw that they had caught sight of the two animals, halted, and were in the act of taking aim at them. But neither West nor Ingleborough paused, raising a foot to the stirrup and being in the act of springing up, when the reports of about a dozen rifles rang out, and West's rein was jerked out of his hand as he was thrown upon his back, while his pony made a series of tremendous bounds, the last of which took it into the river with a plunge of about a dozen feet right into a deep pool. The water splashed on high, glittering in the sunshine, and the next minute the unfortunate beast was floating slowly away towards the swift current, just feebly pawing at the water, and on raising its head it fell again with a heavy splash.

"They can shoot well!" said Ingleborough coolly.

West turned his gaze from the dying pony, irritated beyond measure by his companion's easy-going coolness, and then saw the full extent of their trouble, for Ingleborough's pony had sunk upon its knees and then lain gently over upon its side, to die instantly without a struggle, one of the Boers' bullets having passed right through its brain.

"Might have been worse!" continued Ingleborough. "They did not hit us! Come along, lad! They can't see us now. Follow me, and let's creep to

the fort. Keep down, lad; keep down."

West had involuntarily dropped on all-fours as Ingleborough spoke, and none too soon, for another dozen bullets came rattling over them, cutting the twigs and spattering amongst the rocks, while several passed close to them with a buzzing sound.

"There!" cried Ingleborough the next minute. "No question now about what we're going to do. Here's our fort; there's plenty of water; and the Boers have shot our provisions ready for us. We must cut some of the meat up for biltong, and eat as much as we can while the rest of it is fresh."

"For heaven's sake don't talk of eating!" cried West. "Look here: let's creep along through the cover and try and get away."

"On foot, followed by mounted men? No good; we should be pumped out in less than a couple of hours!"

"Then let's make the brutes pay dearly for what they've done!" cried West angrily. "Now Ingle, let's prove to them that we can use our rifles too! I'm going to shoot every horse I can."

"Very well: so am I; and if that does not beat them off I'm going to bring down man after man till the rest of them run for their lives. Got a good place?"

"Yes," said West, whose rifle-barrel rested in a crack between two stones.

"Then fire away; but don't waste a shot!"

"Trust me!" cried West grimly. "Now then, fire; and remember the despatch!"

He took careful aim as he spoke, and drew trigger, with the result that one of the Boer ponies stopped short, spun round, flung its rider, and galloped madly away.

The next moment Ingleborough's rifle cracked, and a second pony began to walk on three legs, while the party opened out, galloping so as to form

a half-circle about their enemies, the two ends resting on the river bank and forming a radius of about three hundred yards.

“Sixteen more ponies to bring down,” said Ingleborough; “and those two dismounted men will take cover and begin to stalk us.”

“That’s what the whole party will do!” said West bitterly. “We shall hit no more ponies: they’ll get them all into cover, and then come creeping nearer and nearer.”

At that moment Ingleborough fired again right in front where one of the Boers dismounted among some trees.

“There’s one more though,” said Ingleborough, for the poor brute he had fired at reared up and then fell, to lie kicking on its flank. “Try for another yourself, lad!”

Before he had finished speaking West had fired again, and another pony was hit, to come tearing towards them, dragging its dismounted rider after it, for the man clung to the reins till he was jerked off his feet and drawn along the ground some fifty yards, when his head came in contact with a stone, and he lay insensible, his pony galloping for another hundred yards and then falling, paralysed in its hindquarters.

And now the Boers’ bullets began to rattle about the stones which protected the hidden pair, keeping them lying close and only able to fire now and then; but they got chances which they did not miss of bringing down, killing, or disabling five more of the enemy’s ponies, which upon being left alone began to graze, and naturally exposed themselves.

Maddened by their losses and inability to see their foes, the Boers kept reducing the distance, creeping from stone to bush and from bush to stone, rendering the defenders’ position minute by minute one of greater peril.

But the danger did not trouble West. It only increased the excitement from which he suffered, and, with his eyes flashing in his eagerness, he kept on showing the Boers where he lay by firing at every opportunity, religiously keeping his aim for the ponies, in the full belief that before long the Boers would retire.

“It’s no good to play that game!” cried Ingleborough suddenly, and he made a quick movement, turning a little to his right and firing.

There was a hoarse yell, and a man sprang up not above a hundred yards away, dropped his rifle, and turning round he began to stagger away.

“You are firing at the Boers, Ingle,” cried West excitedly.

“Yes: it was time!” growled Ingleborough, through his teeth, with his voice sounding hoarse and strange. “I’ve hit three. Two haven’t moved.”

“What’s the matter?” asked West, in a tone of anxiety, for he felt that something serious had happened to his comrade.

“Don’t talk,” growled Ingleborough angrily. “Look! Those two. Fire!”

Two of the Boers away to West’s left front had suddenly sprung up, and bending low were running towards him, evidently making for a patch of bush, out of which a mass of grey stone peered, not a hundred yards from the young men’s shelter. Feeling now that it was life for life, West glanced along the barrel of his rifle, waiting till the Boers had nearly reached their goal, and then, just as the second dashed close behind his leader, West drew trigger, shivering the next moment, for as the smoke rose he saw one of the men lying upon his face and the other crawling back on all-fours.

“Good shot!” said Ingleborough hoarsely, and then he uttered a deep groan.

“Ingle, old fellow, what is it?” cried West.

The only answer he obtained was from his comrade’s piece, for the latter fired again, and another Boer sprang into sight not a hundred yards away, fell upon his knees, and then rolled over.

“Ingle, old fellow,” cried West; “don’t say you’re hurt!”

“Oh!” groaned Ingleborough. “Wasn’t going to, old man; but that last brute got me.”

“Hurt much?”

“Much? It’s like red-hot iron through me. Oh, if I only had some water!”

“Water?” cried West, springing up. “Yes; I’ll get some.”

Crack, crack, crack! Half-a-dozen rifles rang out in different directions, and in an instant West suffered for his thoughtless unselfish act, for he felt as if someone had struck him a cruel blow with a sjambok across the face from the front, while someone else had driven the butt of his rifle with all his force full upon his shoulder-blade—this blow from the back driving him forward upon his knees and then causing him to fall across Ingleborough. Then for a few moments everything seemed as a blank.

“Hurt much?” came the next minute, as if from a distance.

“Hurt? No!” said West huskily, and he made an effort and rose to his knees. Then, stung to rage by an agonising pain which stiffened him into action, he levelled his rifle once more, took a quick aim at a couple of the Boers who were running towards them in a stooping position, fired, and distinctly saw one of the two drop to the ground.

The next moment someone fired over his shoulder, and the other went down, just as West’s rifle dropped from his hand and he fell over sideways, yielding to a horribly sickening sensation, followed by a half-dreamy fancy that someone had felt for and got hold of his hand, to grip it in a way that was at first terribly painful—a pang seeming to run up from hand to shoulder. The pain appeared to grow worse and worse, then deadened, and came again, and so on, like spasms of agony, while all the time the firing went on from all around.

“Poor old Ingle!” was about his last clear thought; “they’ve killed him, and now they’re firing till they’ve quite frightened me! Oh, how they keep on shooting! Get it over, you cowardly brutes—nearly a score of you against two! Oh!” he groaned then: “if I could only have delivered my despatch!”

His left hand was raised painfully to his breast to feel whether the paper was still safe; but the pain of the effort was sickening, and his hand glided over something wet and warm and sticky.

“Poor old Ingle! Blood!” flashed through his brain, as the rifle reports rang out from very close now, and then all was blank.

The end of everything seemed to have come.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

The Surgeon’s Words.

“Bad enough, poor fellow; but I think I can pull them both round. Nothing vital, you see, touched, and these Mauser bullets make wonderfully clean wounds!”

“And the other?”

“Bad flesh-wounds—great loss of blood. I just got at that artery in time.”

West heard these words spoken by someone whose head kept getting in his way as he lay staring up at the great bright stars directly overhead, and it seemed very tiresome.

He tried to speak and ask whoever it was to move aside; but his tongue would not stir, and he lay perfectly still, trying to think what it all meant, and in a dull far-off sort of way it gradually dawned upon him that the people near him were talking about the Boers he had somehow or another and for some reason shot down.

Then, as he thought, the calm feeling he was enjoying grew troubled, and he began to recall the fact that he had been shooting somebody’s ponies to supply somebody else with food, and that he must have been mad, for he felt convinced that they would not be nice eating, as he had heard that the fat was oily and the flesh tasted sweet. Besides which, it would be horrible to have to eat horseflesh at a time when his throat was dry with an agonising thirst. Then the terrible thought forced itself upon him that while shooting down ponies he had missed them and killed men instead, and once more all was blank.

The next time the power of thinking came to the poor fellow all was very

dark, and a jarring pain kept running through him, caused by the motion of his hard bed, which had somehow grown wheels and was being dragged along.

Cattle were lowing and sheep bleating. There were shouts, too, such as he knew were uttered by Kaffir drivers, and there were the crackings of their great whips.

After a while he made out the trampling of horses and heard men talking, while in an eager confused way he listened for what they would say about those two wounded Boers, one of whom had nearly bled to death before that artery was stopped. These, he felt, must be the Boers he shot when he ought to have shot ponies.

And as he got to that point the trouble of thinking worried his brain so that he could think no more, and again all was blank.

At last came a morning when West woke up in a great room which seemed to be familiar. There were nurses moving about in their clean white-bordered dresses, and he knew that he was in some place fitted up as a hospital. Several of the occupants of the beds wore bandages suggestive of bad wounds, and to help his thoughts there came from time to time the dull heavy reports of cannon.

He did not recollect all that had preceded his coming yet; but he grasped the fact that he had been wounded and was now in hospital.

He lay for a few minutes with his brain growing clearer and clearer, and at last, seeing one of the nurses looking in his direction, he tried to raise one hand, but could not. The other proved more manageable, and in obedience to a sign the nurse came, laid a hand upon his forehead, and smiled down in his face.

“Your head’s cooler!” she said. “You’re better?”

“Yes,” he replied: “have I been very bad?”

“Terribly! We thought once that you would not recover.”

“And Ingleborough?”

“Ingleborough? Oh, you mean your companion who was brought in with you?”

West nodded: he could not speak.

“Well, I think he will get better now!”

“But his wound: is it so bad?”

“He nearly bled to death; but you must not talk much yet.”

“Only a little!” said West eagerly. “Pray tell me, he will get better?”

“Oh yes: there’s no doubt about it, I believe.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” cried West fervently. “But what place is this?”

“This? Why, Kimberley, of course!”

“Ah!” cried West excitedly, and his hand went to his breast. “My jacket!”

“Your jacket?” said the nurse. “Oh, that was all cut and torn, and soaked with blood. I think it has been burnt.”

“What!” cried West. “Oh, don’t say that!”

“Hush, hush! What is this?” said a deep, stern voice. “Patient delirious, nurse?”

A quiet, grave-looking face was bent over West’s pillow, and the poor fellow jumped at the idea that this must be the surgeon.

“No, sir; no, sir!” he whispered excitedly, catching at the new-comer’s arm. “I am better: it is only that I am in trouble about my clothes.”

“Clothes, eh?” said the doctor, smiling. “Oh, you will not want clothes for two or three weeks yet.”

“Not to dress, sir,” whispered West excitedly; “but I must have my jacket. It is important!”

“Why?” said the surgeon, laying his hand upon the young man’s brow soothingly.

“I was bringing on a despatch from Mafeking when I was shot down, sir,” whispered West excitedly.

“It was sewn up for safety in the breast.”

“Indeed?” said the doctor, laying his fingers on the lad’s pulse and looking keenly in his eyes.

“Yes, sir, indeed!” said West eagerly. “I know what I am saying, sir.”

“Yes, you are cool now; but I’m afraid the jacket will have been burned with other garments of the kind. Of course, the contents of the pockets will have been preserved.”

“Oh, they are nothing, sir,” cried West piteously. “It is a letter sewn up in the breast that I want. It is so important!”

“Well, I’ll see!” said the doctor gravely, and, signing to the nurse who had been in attendance, he left the ward, with West in a state of feverish anxiety.

At last, to West’s intense satisfaction, the horribly blood-stained garment was brought in, and his hand went out trembling to catch it by the breast, fully expecting to find the missive gone.

“Yes,” he cried wildly, “it is here!”

“Hah!” cried the doctor, and, taking out his knife, he prepared to slit it up, but West checked him.

“No,” he panted: “the Commandant. Send for him here!”

“My good lad, he is so busy, he would not come! Let me cut out the message and send it to him.”

“No,” said West firmly; “I will not part from it till he comes.”

“But really—”

“Tell him a wounded messenger from Mafeking has a letter for him, and he will come.”

West was right: the magic word Mafeking brought the Commandant to his bedside; and as soon as he came up he stopped short and made what little blood poor West had left flush to his face, for he cried:

“Hullo! Why, it is our illicit-diamond-dealer! I thought we were never to see you again!”

“It is not true!” cried West. “The man who denounced me lied!”

“Then you have been to Mafeking?”

“Yes, sir: Mr Ingleborough and I.”

“And brought back a despatch?”

“Yes, sir: here it is!”

“Where?” said the Commandant, glancing down at the stained tunic on the bed.

“Open it now, sir,” said West to the doctor, who took out his knife again, slit the cloth, and drew out the big letter, terribly soaked with its bearer’s blood.

“Bravo! Brave messenger!” cried the Commandant, grasping West’s hand before tearing open the packet and finding enough of the despatch unstained to allow him to decipher the principal part of the text. “Hah!” he cried, when he had finished, “on the whole good news; but,” he continued, glancing at the date, “you have been a long time coming.”

“Have I, sir? We lost no time!”

“The poor fellow has been lying here for a fortnight, sir,” said the surgeon.

“A fortnight ago? Why, that was the day when the reconnoitring party

returned with the captured sheep and cattle. Yes, I remember now: they had a brush with the Boers up the river. Of course, yes: they were attracted by the firing, and saved two young Englishmen. You are one of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well done, then! Our raiding party did good work, though they did have a desperate fight afterwards to get through the Boer lines. Getting better?"

"Yes, sir," said West, with a sigh of relief: "now that I have got my despatch safely into your hands!"

"But what about your bad character?"

"It was a false accusation, sir!" cried West indignantly. "The man who denounced me was the criminal himself."

"Well, you have done your duty so truly that I believe you in preference to him."

"But I shall be able to fully clear myself, sir, soon, for this man is a prisoner now with the cavalry brigade. Has that come into the town yet, sir, with the prisoners, guns, and the convoy they captured?"

"Hah!" cried the Commandant: "this is news indeed! Has the brigade captured all you say?"

"Yes, sir," said West, and he told all that had taken place up to the time of he and Ingleborough being cut off and chased by the Boers.

"We knew nothing of this!" said the Commandant. "We are prisoners ourselves; but your news gives us hope of a speedy release, for the General is not one to let the grass grow under his feet."

"He is not, sir!" said West. "Then you shall bring me and the man who accused me face to face."

"The sooner the better, my lad!" said the Commandant warmly. "How soon will he be up, doctor?"

“Within a fortnight, I hope, sir!” was the reply.

“Then goodbye for the present, my lad!” said the Commandant. “Your long-delayed despatch will send a thrill of hope through all here in Kimberley, for it breathes nothing but determination to hold the Boers at bay.”

“May I say one word more, sir?” said West excitedly.

“What do you think, doctor?”

“He has said enough, sir, and if he talks much more we shall have the fever back. Well, perhaps he’ll fret if he does not get something off his mind.”

“What is it, then?” said the Commandant.

“I had a brave comrade to ride with the despatch, sir.”

“To be sure, yes, I remember. What about him? Not killed, I hope?”

“No, sir, but badly wounded, and lying somewhere here.”

“Poor fellow! I must see him. There must be promotion for you both.”

“If you would see him, sir, and speak to him as you have spoken to me,” said West, with the weak tears rising to his eyes.

“Of course, yes! There, shake hands, my lad: you have done splendidly! Don’t worry about the diamond charge! I can feel that it was a contemptible lie! Now, doctor, take me to your other patient.”

“Ha!” sighed West, nestling back on his pillow with a calm look of content in his eyes, which closed directly after for a sleep that lasted ten hours at the least.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Anson in a Hole—and something else.

“Don’t worry about the diamond charge!” said the Commandant; but Oliver West did, day after day, though he got better fast and was soon able to go and sit with Ingleborough, who slowly recovered, as a man does who has had nearly all the life-blood drained from his body. West worried, and Ingle borough did too; for those were anxious days, those in Kimberley, which brought strong men low, even near to despair, while the wounded, weak, and sick were often ready to think that relief would never come.

West and Ingleborough recovered from their wounds only gradually, to suffer with the rest, returning to duty when really unfit, while the deadly work went on, the men braving the shell and shot with more spirit when they knew that the women and children were safe within the mines.

Then came the day of relief, and with it the feeling that a long night of misery and despair had ended; and that night West and Ingleborough grasped hands, the former’s pale sallow face lighting up with something of his old look, as he exclaimed: “Now, if the General would only march in with his prisoners, and bring Anson before us face to face!”

Everything, the proverb says, comes to the man who waits, and certainly it was so here, for the day did come when the General rode in at the head of his dashing cavalry brigade, and, what was more, with the prisoners, and with them Anson, very much reduced in weight.

There was something more than mere eagerness to be freed from an accusation which led the two young men down to the General’s camp next morning to wait until they could see him in their turn.

On their way they sought out the sergeant who had had Anson under his charge, and he grinned at them in recognition.

“You were about right, gentlemen,” he said, “about that prisoner.”

“What about him?” said West eagerly.

“About his being an Englishman. I’ve seen a lot of him along with the other prisoners, and he’s as English as can be. Piet Retif! Why, he’s got James Anson written on the tails of his shirts—that is, what he’s got left.”

“But look here, sergeant,” said Ingleborough anxiously: “what about his wagon?”

“Oh, that’s all right, sir! Loaded up.”

“Has he had the run of it?”

“Not he, sir. He wanted to, but I only let him get some under-toggery, shirts and such. I couldn’t refuse him that!”

“Did he go alone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Quite?”

“Well, not quite, sir, because I was with him.”

“Hah!” sighed Ingleborough, in a tone full of relief.

“I’ve stuck to him, by the General’s orders, ever since. Like a leech, sir,” said the sergeant, in conclusion—“like a leech.”

The cavalry General welcomed the young men warmly, and, as it happened, the same four officers were with him, ready to join in the greeting.

“I never expected to see you two fellows again,” said one of them, laughing. “I was out with my men when you were cut off. Why, you must have had a very narrow escape!”

“Of course,” said the General, laughing; “but that has been the fashion: we have all had narrow escapes. Well, you got safely in with your despatch?”

“We got in with our despatch, sir!” said West rather grimly, “but not safely;” and he briefly told their adventures.

“Bravo! Well done!” was chorussed.

“Why, you two will have to join the regulars!” said the General. “We can’t

have men like you for volunteers! Think it over, and, if you decide to join, come to me, and I'll see what I can do! Now then, don't want to be rude; but I have no time for ordinary visitors. You sent word in that you wanted to see me on important business. What is it?"

"You speak," said Ingleborough, and West began.

"We want to know about the prisoner taken that day, sir—the man who said he was a Boer."

"I remember," cried the General. "I have him safe."

"When is he to be tried, sir?"

"Can't say; he will be handed over to the authorities who see to such things now. You said he was a renegade who had joined the Boers."

"Yes, sir, after being charged with illicit-diamond-dealing with the Kaffirs working at the great Kimberley mines; and we want you to give orders for the wagon he had with him to be searched."

"His wagon searched?" cried the General. "How am I to know which wagon he had?"

"The sergeant knows where it is, sir," replied West; "and we could recognise it directly."

"But why do you want it searched—what for?"

"For diamonds, sir, that he brought away from Kimberley, and which you have brought back."

"H'm! Diamonds, eh? This sounds interesting!" said the General. "You think he has some there?"

"We both believe he has, sir, and of great value."

"What do you say, gentlemen?"

"Oh, let's have the search made by all means!" cried one of the officers,

laughing. “It may mean salvage and loot, and all sorts of good things!”

“Very well! Take the matter up, and I’ll see the search made! Let the prisoner be present, of course. I’ll be ready in half-an-hour.”

Punctually to the minute the General was ready, and he walked down through the temporary camp to where the wagon stood among scores of others, while the sergeant and four men stood by with Anson, who looked shifty and uncomfortable, wincing suddenly as he caught sight of West and Ingleborough, and then gazing sharply about at the mounted Lancers on duty as patrols, for the prisoners were many, and there had been several attempts at escape.

The General looked at him sharply, and then at the wagon.

“Is that your wagon, prisoner?”

“It was till you took it!” replied the young man surlily.

“What do you say, sergeant?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the sergeant, with military brevity. “I marked it with my knife the day that it was taken.”

As he spoke he laid a finger upon a couple of notches he had made in the wood-work.

“Now then,” said the General, “before I have the wagon examined—”

Anson’s eyes twitched.

“Repeat the charge you made against this man!” continued the General.

Ingleborough now firmly repeated almost word for word what he had before said, and charged Anson with being an illicit-diamond-dealer.

“And upon what do you base this charge?” said the General sternly.

“The personal knowledge of myself and friend here,” replied Ingleborough.

“All lies, General,” cried Anson excitedly. “Those two are charging me with what they did themselves. They were illicit-diamond-dealers, and when they were found out they tried to plant the crime on me. All lies!”

“Crime? Yes,” said the General thoughtfully. “Yes; I suppose it is one of the greatest crimes that a man can commit in Kimberley. All lies, eh! Well, sir, not all, for it is evident from your speech that you are an Englishman and not a Boer. I judge too that you were in the company’s office at Kimberley.”

“Oh yes, General,” said Anson; “that is true, and through the plotting of these two men I was turned out of my situation.”

“And then deserted to the Boers?”

“No, General. I was obliged to do something for a living, so I bought a wagon to go in for trade; but I was captured by the Boers and they have kept me a prisoner ever since. Then you fought the Boers and beat them, and took me prisoner again. That’s why I’m here.”

“An Englishman—prisoner to your own countrymen? Why did you not declare what you were? What did he say his name was, sergeant?”

“Said he was a Boer and his name was Piet Retif, sir,” said the sergeant, with a look of disgust at Anson’s fat face.

“Yes; that looks black against him!” said the General. “He is taken with the Boers, while those who charge him are men of trust, being chosen to bear despatches.”

“Because they were not found out, sir!” cried Anson. “There never was a worse pair of cheats and tricksters.”

“Perhaps not!” said the General. “So you were a prisoner with the Boers, my man?”

“Yes, General, and very glad to see the British troops come up and gain such a success.”

“You said that you was a dealer in mealies and corn,” growled the

sergeant.

“Well, a man must do something for his living.”

“Of course,” said the General. “Well, you look simple and innocent enough.”

“I am, sir, really!” cried Anson.

“And never engaged in illicit-diamond-dealing?”

“Me, sir? Never,” cried Anson virtuously. “I was only charged by those two to save themselves! Then they got on, and I was trampled down.”

“And joined the Boers out of revenge, eh?”

“No, sir: it was all fate and accident.”

“Well, fate is very unkind to us sometimes, my man,” said the General. “That is your wagon and span of oxen, you say?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you have prospered by your change. What did you say you traded in?”

“Provender, sir—mealies and corn.”

“And you?” cried the General, turning sharply to West. “What do you think he deals in?”

“I believe he deals in diamonds, sir,” replied West.

“Why?” said the General.

“For one reason, sir, because my friend, in whom I have perfect faith, caught him in the act.”

“Yes: anything more?”

“I know him to be a cowardly liar, sir, and—”

“Oh!” groaned Anson. “I never heard anything like it.”

“Go on,” said the General.

“Lastly, sir, because he set it about that I had volunteered to carry a despatch to Mafeking so as to get away with the diamonds I had smuggled.”

“And did you?” said the General.

“I got away to Mafeking with the despatch!” said West, smiling.

“And where are the diamonds in question?”

“My friend and I believe that they are in James Anson’s wagon,” said West bitterly, for he felt bitter then against the traitor, whose proceedings he recalled when they were prisoners. Later on he felt a little sorry for his words.

“Oh!” cried Anson, throwing up his hands and looking appealingly at the General, who fixed him with his eyes.

“Well,” he said; “what have you to say to this?”

“It’s abominable, sir—it’s atrocious—it’s cruel!”

“Then you have no smuggled diamonds with you?”

“No, sir,” cried Anson excitedly. “They charged me once before, and had my wagon searched by the police.”

“And did the police find any?”

“No, sir, not one! It was a blind, sir, so that they might carry off theirs by throwing the police off the scent. I’ll be bound to say they have a lot with them now!”

“Well, I doubt that!” said the General, smiling. “Where would they carry them?”

“Oh, sir, you don’t know what artful tricks are played!” said Anson eagerly.

“Oh, I’ve heard of a few since I came to South Africa; but I don’t think it likely that a couple of despatch-riders would carry many illicit-diamonds with them!”

“Have the butts of their revolvers examined, sir, and the stuffing of their saddles,” cried Anson. “I have heard of the butts of rifles being bored to hold a lot.”

“So have I!” said the General; “but I fancy a wagon would be more likely to supply hiding-places!”

“Oh yes, sir, but the police inspector searched my wagon, and did not find any.”

“You would have no objection, of course, being perfectly innocent,” said the General, “to some of my men searching your wagon?”

“Of course, I shouldn’t like it, sir, but—”

“But? Ah, you mean conquest gives me the right of search?”

“It’s like casting a slur on a man’s character, sir.”

“But it makes it shine out the brighter when you are proved to be innocent! Here, sergeant, this case begins to be interesting! Search our friend’s wagon.”

Anson tried to master a wince, and merely shrugged his shoulders, standing with his hands in his pockets while the sergeant and his men commenced their task, examining every part of the wagon while the officers waited patiently, lighting up and smoking their cigars until the sergeant came back to make his report.

“Well, what have you found?”

“Nothing but these, sir,” replied the sergeant stiffly. “Tucked away behind the doubled tilt they were, sir,” and the man held out a revolver, Anson’s sword-stick, and his little mahogany flute-case.

“Humph! No diamonds, sergeant?”

“Not so much as a pin or ring, sir,” replied the man.

“Are these yours, Mr Piet Retif?” said the General.

“The walking-stick and the flute-case are mine,” said Anson coolly. “The pistol must be the driver’s. I had a rifle; but your men took that away.”

“Nothing else?” said the General.

“Nothing else, sir. We looked everywhere,” replied the sergeant, and he offered his superior the objects he had brought; but the General shrugged his shoulders and looked at his officers, who each examined the revolver, stick, and flute-case, and passed them back to the sergeant.

“Well, gentlemen,” said the General, turning to West and Ingleborough: “you hear. What have you to say now?”

“The prisoner owned to these things being his!” said Ingleborough.

“No, I didn’t!” said Anson sharply. “Revolver isn’t mine.”

“Only lent to you, perhaps,” said Ingleborough, taking the weapon from the sergeant’s hands and cocking it, making Anson wince.

“I’m not going to fire,” said Ingleborough, smiling contemptuously, as he held the pistol in both hands with his thumb-nails together on the top of the butt. Then, pressing the cock sidewise, the butt opened from end to end upon a concealed hinge, showing that it was perfectly hollowed out and that half-a-dozen large diamonds lay within, closely packed in cotton wool.

Anson turned clay-coloured.

“’Tisn’t mine!” he cried. “I know nothing about it!”

“Well, never mind,” said the General; “it is ours now. An interesting bit of loot, gentlemen!”

There was a murmur of voices at this, and as soon as the pistol had been handed round the butt was closed with a sharp snap, and the General

turned to Ingleborough again.

“Well, sir,” he said: “is that all?”

“I am not sure,” replied Ingleborough; “but I am suspicious about that stick.”

“You think it is hollowed out?”

“Yes, sir,” said Ingleborough, and, taking it in his hands, he drew it apart, dragging into the light from its sheath a handsome Damascened three-edged blade, which he held against the cane, proving that the blade went right down to the ferrule at the end.

“What about the handle?” said one of the officers eagerly, as Ingleborough thrust back the blade into its cane sheath.

“That is what I suspect!” said Ingleborough, and he carefully examined the silver-gilt tip, but twisted and turned it in vain, for there seemed to be no way of opening it, till all at once he tried to twist the sheath portion beneath the double ring which divided hilt from sheath, when the handle turned for about half-an-inch and was then drawn off, disclosing a hollow shell lining which held another deposit of diamonds packed in cotton wool.

“More loot, gentlemen!” said the General, smiling. “What comes next?”

“The flute,” cried two voices together, and Ingleborough opened the case, showing the three joints fitting tightly in the velvet-lined compartments.

“A silent musical instrument!” said the General, smiling.

“Can anyone play the overture to the Crown Diamonds?” said one of the *aides-de-camp* merrily.

“This is the overture!” said another, and Ingleborough took out two joints in turn, perfectly empty, fitted them together, and then took out the top joint, to put that in its proper position, before raising the instrument to his lips and running up and down the gamut.

“Nothing there,” said the General.

But Ingleborough lowered the flute, held it in both hands, and drew it apart at the tuning-slide, held it sidewise, and then unscrewed the top plug, showing an opening, out of which he shook a magnificent gem of great size and perfect make.

“Bravo!” cried the General excitedly. And then: “I’m afraid, Mr Dealer in mealies and corn, the judgment will go dead against you. Have you done?” he continued, turning to Ingleborough.

“Not quite, sir!” replied the latter. “Come, West, don’t let me get all the credit for unmasking the scoundrel.”

“Look here,” cried Anson viciously, “I protest against being called a scoundrel! Those are my private savings, invested in what were bought honestly.”

“I think, sir, you had better keep your tongue silent until we have quite done!” said the General.

Then, turning to the two young men, he bade them go on.

“Come, West,” said Ingleborough, “you suspect where our friend who is no scoundrel has hidden more diamonds, do you not?”

“Well, yes,” said West, rather unwillingly, for the whole business disgusted him.

“Speak out, then! I am sure it is in the same place as I think he has more plunder; but you shall have your turn now.”

“No, no; go on,” said West warmly.

“If you suspect that there is some place unsearched,” said the General sternly, “speak out, sir.”

“Then I believe, sir,” said West, “that if the water-cask that is slung under the wagon is opened you will find a number of diamonds hidden there!”

There was a burst of excitement at this, everyone present speaking save the sergeant, who did a bit of pantomime which meant: “Of course!” for he bent down and gave his leg a sounding slap.

“Yes,” said Ingleborough; “that is where I meant.”

“Why, I thought o’ that once,” cried the sergeant, “and then I says to myself: ‘That’s too stoopid a place; no one would hide diamonds where they’re sure to be found’; but I crept underneath on my hands and knees and gave it a swing so as to make the water wash about inside. That satisfied me, and I came away.”

“You have hit the mark, Mr West,” said the General, smiling. “There is no doubt about it! Look at the prisoner’s face!”

Anson tried hard to pull it back into its normal shape, for he had been gazing at West with a malignant look that meant anything from a rifle-shot to a stab with a bayonet.

“Now, sergeant, see if you can do better this time!” cried the General, as Anson’s mouth shut with a click.

Then he stood fast with his brow wrinkled and his hands clenched, waiting expectantly with the rest of those present until the cask was set free from the raw-hide reins by which it was slung under the hind part of the wagon, and then rolled out, giving forth the regular hollow sound of a barrel half-full of liquid.

“Only sounds like water!” muttered the sergeant, and he set it running, to soak into the dry ground, and draining out as much as he could, before giving an order to the nearest man to take hold of one end while he raised the other, both men looking stern and severe in the extreme. Then together they gave the cask a lusty shake, and the sound which followed was that of some shovels full of pebbles rattling in the inside.

The next minute they had set the cask down on end with a grin of delight, which was taken up by their fellows, while a satisfied smile dawned upon the faces of the *aides-de-camp*.

“Here, stop that fellow!” shouted one of the officers, for, in spite of his

heaviness, Anson proved that he could be active enough upon occasion, and this was one; for, seizing his opportunity, he dived under the wagon, and by the time the soldiers had run round to the other side he was off, dodging in and out among the wagons in the mad idea that he could escape; but before he had gone a hundred yards he came out suddenly upon a mounted man, and the next instant he went sprawling over a lance-shaft, and the steel-shod butt end was planted upon his back to keep him from rising.

“Pity you should have taken all that trouble!” said the sergeant, as he came panting up, followed by his men, “because we might want you to tell us all a bit about the value of them stones! Now then, up with you. Let him get up, Lancer! And see here, my lad, if you cut and run again—being a prisoner caught in the act of trying to escape—my men have orders to fire, and you’re so broad and fat that they are sure to bring you down first shot.”

Anson glared at the men’s rifles and fixed bayonets, but he said nothing, marching back between the men to the spot where he had left the General and his old fellow-clerks; but the barrel had been carried to a place of safety, and those who had witnessed his discomfiture had gone.

Half-an-hour later he had been marched out of the camp, and was under lock and key in the military prison, a sentry being posted at the door.

Chapter Forty.

Winding Up.

The adventures of Oliver West and his friend Ingleborough were pretty well at an end; and it was time, for between wounds and exposure they had been brought to a state which necessitated plenty of rest and comforts to enable them to quite recover themselves. Of feasting, praising, and complimenting they had their fill—more than enough, West said, for he declared that the hues of returning health which were coming into his cheeks were only blushes caused by the way in which people talked about his bravery, dash, “and all that stuff.”

Ingleborough took it all more contentedly.

“I don’t mind their praising us!” he said. “Frankly, I rather like it; and, without bragging, I think we did earn it all!”

“Well, we did run some risks!” said West; “and of course it’s much nicer for our friends to know that we escaped and are alive and well.”

“And a jolly deal nicer for us too. But what do you say to joining the army? After what the General said I think we might both get commissions.”

“Perhaps,” said West; “but it’s doubtful now that everything is settling down. I feel disposed to invest my share of the loot and to stop on with the company after the splendid offer they have made me. Hadn’t you better do the same?”

“I’m nearly half disposed to, Noll,” replied Ingleborough; “but more than half inclined to go into the police altogether. I’ve had an invitation, and I think the life would suit me better than settling down to a desk. Yes, this settles it! I shall go on to Norton and say ‘Yes.’”

“Well, I’m sorry,” said West; “but at the same time I’m glad, for you’ll make a splendid officer!”

“Here, hold hard! I don’t want to hear you begin puffing me. By the way, you heard the news about Fatty Anson?”

“No, not a word!” cried West excitedly.

“Promoted.”

“Nonsense! What a shame!”

“It’s a fact, my lad! He has just received his commission in Mrs Partington’s Brigade.”

“What!” cried West. “Oh, this is some bit of chaff!”

“Oh no!” said Ingleborough, laughing. “It’s a fact. The regiment employed by the old lady to help her keep out the Atlantic with a mop.”

“Bah! You mean that he has been sentenced with other convicts to help to build the Cape breakwater?”

“Good boy! Quite right! For five years!” replied Ingleborough.

“Well,” said West thoughtfully, “I suppose he deserves it, and I hope he will become a better fellow when he has served his time.”

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