

The Storyteller

GRANGER'S DAUGHTER.

Tramping through the Swazi country, or for the matter of that, through any part of South Africa, under a blazing sun is as near heart-breaking work as anyone need care to venture. It was particularly so when the traveller had only just recovered from a very severe attack of East Coast fever, and had not two coppers to rattle together in his pocket, as was my own case. This was my plight one scorching December day some fifteen years ago as I plodded painfully along on my weary road from the Lebombo Mountains, through scenery so strikingly picturesque that it fascinated even my dull and tired eyes. I intended to make the best of my way to the little mining town of Steynsdorp, which I intended to make my base of operations with a view either to my return to the comforts of civilised life, or to make an opportunity for once more trying my luck on the goldfields of the Transvaal.

I was so weak from the effects of my recent illness that at intervals the trees, hills and high grass danced and whirled before my eyes, then blended into each other in a fantastic haze, and then—when the horizon would commence to revolve—I knew it was time to lie down on the veldt and rest. After each of these pauses I would rise a thousand times stiffer than before, and not a whit refreshed apparently, yet able to continue my journey with a somewhat clearer brain. My thoughts were my only companions, and these by no means pleasant ones. No human form refreshed my gaze during my many days' journey, the native huts being perched on the mountain slopes, and the only living things to be met with in the valley through which I was passing were an occasional group of wild cattle, on a pack of wild dogs flying over the ground like a shadow of a moving cloud I was in that unenviable frame of mind when the fact is borne irresistibly into a man's thoughts that he has been a most egregious ass, and conscience, fully armed, gives him no cessation from assault. And conscience, as is usual with the nagging jade, had reason on her side. Yet my folly had been no more foolish than the follies of thousands of young men—there was no justification in that thought, but there was some little comfort in knowing I was not alone in my recklessness. I had thrown away my soiled wafer before I was certain of getting clean to replace it, and I was now paying the penalty.

In short, I had given up a comfortable and safe billet as surveyor and draughtsman in the offices of the Natal Government railway service for the precarious pursuit of prospecting for gold in the insalubrious neighborhood of Inhambane. It is not to be supposed that I evolved this wild-cat scheme from my own inner consciousness, but was prompted thereto by the glowing tales of an old 'fossicker' whom I met at Maritzburg, whose vivid descriptions of the tropical scenery, and whose faith in the future possibilities of that fever-haunted district fired my imagination and completely unsettled me. It must be remembered that all this occurred some seventeen or eighteen years ago when men were more ready to hunt personally for gold on the veldt than in the degenerate days of the present when gold is found without moving from an office chair.

So I set out with old Tarleton to tempt fortune on the East Coast, but the fickle goddess did not smile on my wooing, and evidently did not reside in that locality. Poor old sanguine Tarleton died shortly after we reached the swamp zone which

was to be the scene of our operations. I soon discovered that scenery, however gratifying to the artistic eye, was no solace to an empty stomach, and ere long I was stricken also with the malaria. For months I lay at death's door and was only debarred from rushing through it by the exertions of some kindly natives who doctored and attended me in one of their spare huts. During one of my attacks of delirium I evaded the vigilance of my watchers, and wandered into the bush, and there lost my money-belt, so that impetuosity was added to my other misfortunes. When I eventually recovered sufficiently to walk I essayed the task upon which I was now engaged, and managed to reach my present stage, after undergoing, during many days, more hardships than I would care to write about or you to read.

Night had fallen an hour or so when the lights of Steynsdorp at last began to glimmer through the darkness. At the time of which I am writing Steynsdorp was very much alive, and not the skeleton bleaching on the veldt it is nowadays. I was trudging along, somewhat cheered by the lights, and speculating on my prospects of getting food and lodging in the village beneath me, when my thoughts were disturbed by the plecty-plock of a horse's hoofs. Horsemen were not very numerous in these parts, and I halted to await the arrival of the cavalier. Presently the rider came into sight, his horse proceeding at a shambling walk, and pulled up his steed when he saw me. He was a strange-looking character, and I must have looked the same to him, for my toilet and apparel generally had a casual-ward appearance. The horse was a powerful bony animal, with a restive look and a wicked eye, while the rider, also of powerful build, was leaning forward on the pommel of his saddle, and groaned as his horse fidgeted about. I could not clearly distinguish his features, but could see he had a prominent nose and chin, and a heavy iron-grey moustache, his voice had a sharp commanding ring, and I could also see that he carried a revolver slung over his shoulder.

'I am Captain Dupont, from Barberton,' he said slowly. 'I was on my way to the King's Kraal at Embokelweni, but this wretched brute gave me a nasty fall a few miles back, and I think I have broken some ribs. I must go on to Steynsdorp, although I am rather badly hurt, I fear, and I would be glad if you will give me a hand to reach there.'

'Certainly,' I replied. 'I am bound for Steynsdorp myself.'

'If I can manage to get as far as Granger's hotel I can lie up there and have a doctor. Every movement is painful, and the sooner I am attended to the better. Do you mind leading the horse?'

I took the bridle, while the Captain leaned forward upon his folded arms over his saddle-wallets, and in this manner we descended the steep, stony path to the little town. Presently we struck the dorp, and, apparently, struck Pandemonium itself at the same time. Those were 'flush' days, and the main (and only) street, every house of which seemed to be a drinking-bar, was agleam with lights, the solemn stillness of the night through which we had just passed was exchanged for an atmosphere of discordant sounds, prominent among which could be heard the painful accordion, doubtful songs shouted by hoarse voices, and choruses rendered by in-harmonic crowds. Here and there, on either side of the street, revel held sway, and threats and invita-

tions to mortal or any other form of combat, were borne on the violated air.

I had no difficulty in finding Granger's hostelry—a capacious iron edifice bearing the alluring title of 'The Miner's Retreat.' Entering the dingy bar through a haze of tobacco smoke I enquired from the truculent-looking barman where Mr. Granger was to be found? A laconic 'At the back' sent me out in that direction, and there I found the proprietor superintending the stabling of some horses and mules. He proved to be a little, wiry, round-shouldered man, with a long, flowing grey beard, which he constantly pulled in a nervous manner, and had small, sharp, ferret-like eyes, which glanced suspiciously from side to side as he spoke. I informed him that a friend of his, Captain Dupont, was outside and required his services.

'Ah! Bless my soul! The Captain has arrived, then? Well, where is he? Not in the bar, surely,' he asked, eagerly.

I explained that Dupont was too much injured to dismount without assistance, whereupon the little man shot out a volley of hurried orders to a group of native servants about preparing a room at once for the Captain, and then darted outside, where I found him dancing fussily about the injured man in a frenzy of bustling activity. With the aid of a few bystanders we carried Dupont to the rear of the hotel building, where a row of neat-looking Kafir huts, furnished in cosy European fashion, were situated. One of these was assigned to the sufferer, and I was given a bed in the same room, while Granger sent for a doctor.

As soon as he felt a little more comfortable, Dupont asked me to do him a further favor by taking his saddle off the horse, and bringing saddle, wallets, and all into the hut. 'You'll find it unusually heavy,' he remarked, 'but I want you to carry it as if it were but the usual weight. I have my reasons for not wishing the bar loafers not to notice it too particularly.'

I did as requested, and found that the saddle was indeed heavy—so heavy that I was considerably astonished, and had some difficulty in handling it in an apparently careless fashion. However, I made no remark, but placed it carefully under the bed, close to the occupant's head, but was soon busied assisting the doctor, a jovial, loud-voiced Irishman—who was destined to become a big medical potentate on the Rand years afterwards.

'You must have a few weeks in bed here,' was the doctor's verdict after making his examination. 'You've two ribs broken, and I wouldn't be surprised at complications setting in. You'll have plenty of fever, anyway, so make yourself as comfortable as you can under the circumstances.'

The Captain's only response was to grumble, not loudly but exceedingly deep, at this pronouncement. When he was well bandaged, and otherwise fixed up, and the doctor departed, he called me to his bedside again.

'Look here, young fellow. I don't know you or anything about you, but I like the look of your face, and I rather pride myself on the fidelity of my first impressions. Are you in a hurry to get away from this place or can you stay with me for a while?'

I told him my story in reply, and said I might as well stay where I was for a time as travel further in my then weak state.

Captain Dupont listened to me attentively, and never removed his keen eyes from my face while I spoke. When I had concluded he seemed to reflect a few minutes.

'Very well, Mr. Robert Graham,' he at last said with a sigh of relief, as if his mind was satisfied. 'You may consider yourself engaged as my valet and man-of-