

CHAPTER VIII.

PLOTTING.

"Ah, ha! my little beauty, and so you have come up to the mountains to day with Harry, have you? Ah, but I have waited long and patiently for this day. Ho, up, Coal, and away!" cried Loffden in a tone of triumph, spurring his coal-black horse into a swift gallop, as he turned and dashed away in the opposite direction from which he was traveling when Tom and Harry passed him.

Back for a few miles he rode, then turning toward the west he dashed on for half an hour when he came to a native village, and riding up to a hut at the edge of the village, he dismounted, and throwing his bridle rein to an old dried up specimen of a Zulu, he cried:

"Here, you yellow devil, hold my horse; and mind, none of your surly looks here or I'll cut your liver out! Give him water, but don't unsaddle. I will want him directly.

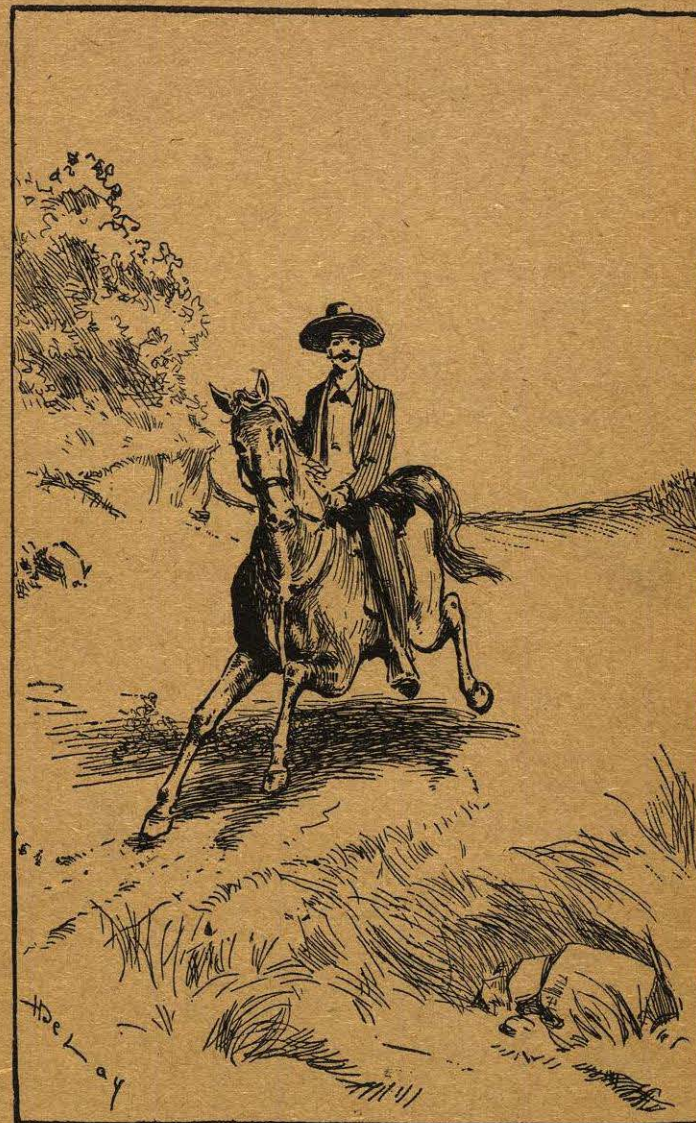
"Yah, yah, Boss Silas; we shall see, we shall see—"

"What's that, you hideous, one-eyed devil?" cried Loffden, furiously. "I'll gouge that other eye out of your hideous head, you snake-eating monkey!" And with this vindictive outburst, he turned and entered the hut.

"Yah, yah," muttered the old Zulu, "some day Boss Silas, some day!"

"Ho, Jante! drunk again? Darn your yellow-livered

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"UP AND AWAY!" CRIED LOFFDEN, AS HE DASHED AWAY. P. 68.

carcass! Up and about, we've got work on hand to-day! Where's Fritz and Oden?" and he gave the Kafir a kick on the shin that sent him howling into the farther corner of the room.

"Ki, yi!" howled Jante. "Fritz an' Oden in tother room."

"Off, then, to the old hermit's. Young Lovejoy's there in the mountains with Tom. You can strike their trail there—follow them up and watch them; see where they go, where they leave their horses and then meet us on the road—we'll follow presently. Away, as if the devil was after you!"

"Without an instant's hesitation, (for it would seem their plans were already arranged and needed no explanation), Jante dashed away and in a moment was thundering away upon his mission, mounted upon a swift horse. As he left, two men entered the room.

"The game's on toast!" cried Loffden, exultantly. "The bird has ventured out at last. Saddle up the horses and let's away—I've sent Jante on to watch them," said Loffden.

Together the three men went out to the kraal, and and soon returned ready for the road.

"Here, you yellow devil, bring my horse!" commanded Loffden. "Mind, none of your muttering or I'll put a bullet through your dirty hide; do you hear?"

"Yah, yah, Boss Silas, I hear."

"See that you remember then!" he said, as he mounted and rode away with his two companions.

"Yah, yah!" muttered the dried up specimen, straightening up till he was as straight as an arrow.

"So Boss Loffden has another job on hand! Ah, we shall see! Boss Silas, we shall see!"

Riding swiftly for half to three-quarters of an hour, Loffden and his companions reached the road some two miles or more above the hermit's cabin; but, without checking their speed, for they knew full well that Tom and Harry would ascend the mountain, they dashed on for half a mile, when of a sudden, Jante appeared riding as if the furies were after him.

"What, ho there, Jante!" cried Loffden, "what's up? You look as if the devil had called on you for a roast and was chasing you out of the woods! Speak, you yellow-livered cuss!"

Breathless and panting with excitement, Jante told him how he had trailed the lovers. Their horses were tethered some two miles above and the lovers were a mile further on in the mountains.

"Quick, quick, Boss Silas!" he cried, hoarse with excitement. "Almighty! Boss Silas they've found a diamond—as big's the misses fist!"

"Out with you, you black devil! But where are their horses? Have you attended to them?" asked Loffden.

"Yah, Boss Silas, I led them about a mile and turned them loose."

"Good! let's off; lead on Jante, lead on! But that diamond Jante, are you sure of that?"

"Yah, Boss Silas, I saw it. It's as big as the misses fist!" he exclaimed.

"What do you think Fritz, can that black devil's story be true?"

"Such diamonds have been found," he replied.

"Ah, it may be the diamond that was lost—that 'Devil's Eye' that was discovered at Kimberly—the first diamond that was found there. It was lost up here in the mountains over twenty years ago," said Loffden.

"Yes, I have heard of that," said Oden. Jante wouldn't dare to tell such a lie; he must have seen it."

"Well, we shall see!" said Loffden.

"In the course of a quarter of an hour, they had arrived at the place where Tom and Harry had left their horses. Here they waited the return of the lovers.

Concealing themselves in the dense growth of bushes that grew close by the side of the little vale where the horses had been feeding, the four plotters waited and planned the murder of Harry and the capture of poor, little Tom.

"We must make a sure thing of this," said Loffden. "Lovejoy is a quick shot and he will fight. I will attend to him myself," and he examined his rifle. "Ah," he said, "you never failed me yet."

"You ain't going to shoot him are you?" asked Oden, with a shudder of horror.

"It's the only thing that we can do. Don't weaken now—remember the diamond; you and Fritz may have it if you will stand by me in this. Sh—I hear them coming," and again he examined his rifle, critically.



CHAPTER IX.

A TRAGEDY.

"Yes," said Harry, as they started to go, "we will call in when we go back."

Ah, could they have foreseen what was in store for them, they would not have set out with such light and happy hearts. Could they have looked into the future and seen the dark deeds of bloodshed and crime, the days and nights of suffering, of misery, of woe, this tale of love and adventure had never been told.

But the future, unfortunately, or, perhaps, fortunately, (who can say?) was not revealed. So we find our young friends riding swiftly away from the little cabin toward the mountains.

"Harry," asked Tom, "what do you suppose was the matter with that old man?"

"It was heart-disease, I think," answered Harry. "But there was something about you that brought on the attack. It came near ending his life."

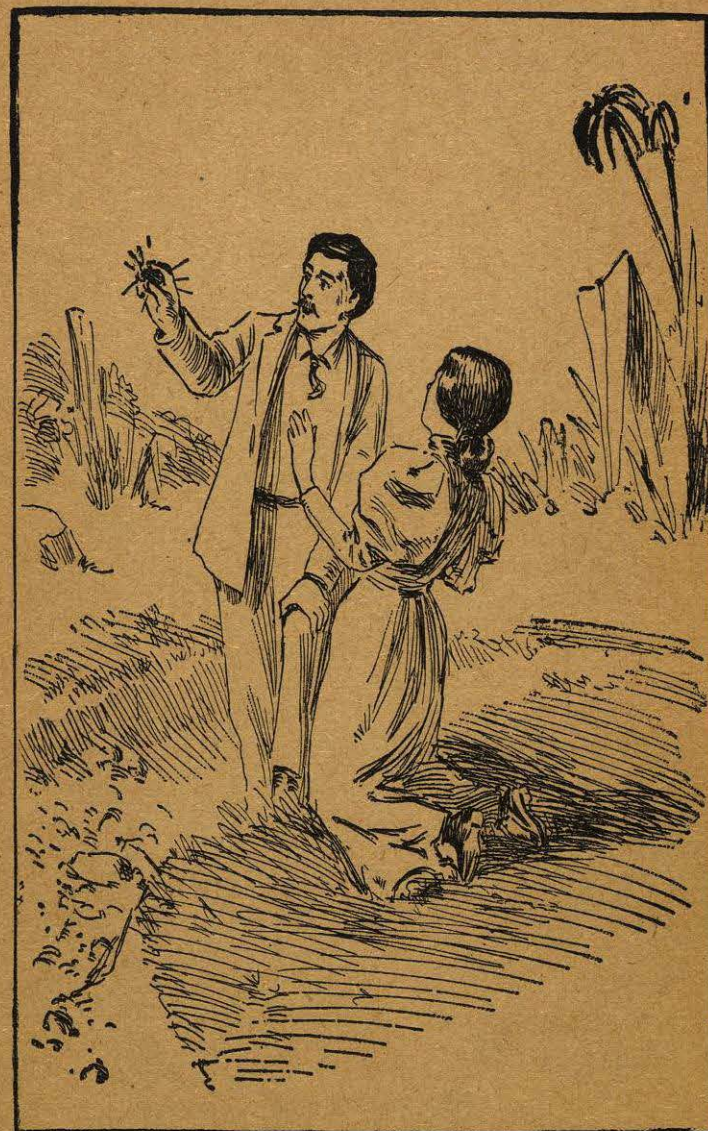
"But who can it be, Harry? I never saw him before," she said.

"I think that he knew your mother; I have heard something about it, I think. Don't you know anything about a love affair between your father and some one else over your mother?" asked Harry.

"No," she replied, "I never heard of it."

"Your father and this old hermit, so I have heard,

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THE RAYS OF THE SUN FELL UPON IT.

were rivals for your mother. They fought a duel, or were 'going to fight, when your mother interfered and stopped them. She married your father, of course, and they have been sworn enemies ever since. This old man could never get over his disappointment. He is a little like me, Tom; I don't believe that I could ever love again, if the girl I love should refuse me. It's the nature of some men to love with their whole heart; and, if they fail to win their love, they can never love again.

"What do you see up there, Tom?" he asked, for she was looking away.

"Oh, nothing," she answered, evasively.

"Ah, here we are. We'll leave our horses here," he said, dismounting and tethering them where the grass grew rank and deep. "There, now we will go up the mountain. Let's follow up this dry creek. I was up here the other day. Right here, I was prospecting, when I looked up and saw Loffden standing up there in the road watching me for some purpose. Curse him, I'd like to send a bullet through him!"

"O Harry!" pleaded Tom, "don't talk so; don't let him worry you on my account!"

"It's not that, Tom; I know that you don't like him, it's not that; but I know something else about him."

And he told her of Gretchen's ruined life and his suspicion of that awful tragedy at the bridge.

"I can't prove it Tom, but I know—I saw her there at one moment and the next she was gone. She has never been seen nor heard of since. Tom, there was no place where she could have gone to so quickly save down into the river. That's where she went. And, Tom, he sent her there, too!"

"O Harry," murmured Tom, "you know I told you that I saw Gretchen that same evening and she told me about that. O Harry! I almost owe my life to her. Oh, I would a thousand times rather die than to be his wife!"

"Tom," said Harry, stepping before her and seizing her hands, "Tom, do you know what I have brought you here for?" And his voice was low and passionate. "Tom, I want you to be my wife—I love you—I have loved you ever since we first met that day by the spring, when that old villain of an ostrich chased you down. Will you marry me, Tom?"

Her great blue eyes drooped and a soft, rosy blush stole over her fair cheek, as she answered in a voice so low and sweet—

"Yes."

There are some things that it is not well to pry into too closely and, perhaps, the blissful half hour which followed, is one of them.

A half hour later we find the lovers walking slowly along the dry, sandy bed of a little brook. They had reached a place where the brook was lined with a dense growth of bushes and had been hunting for the many curious little pebbles which were to be found there. Tom was walking a little in advance, when a little cry of delight escaped her lips, as she stooped and picked up a beautiful pebble, covered with a coat of delicate tinted gold and green.

"O look, look, Harry!" she cried. "Isn't it a beauty? Won't it show off beautifully in my collection?"

For a moment Harry stood staring at the stone in blank amazement. His lips moved, but uttered no

sound, and the hand that he held out to receive it, shook perceptibly as she dropped the stone into it.

"O Harry!" cried Tom, and her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears as she saw the pale face and uncontrollable agitation of her companion, as he stared at the innocent looking pebble. "O Harry! what's the matter? what is it?"

"Tom," said Harry, controlling his emotion with an effort. "O Tom, you can be a rich lady now and without marrying Silas Loffden, too! See, Tom!" he said, scraping the mossy covering from the pebble and holding it up so that the rays of the sun fell upon it; "see, it's a diamond and a valuable one too! It is more valuable than all the boasted wealth of Silas Loffden."

As the rays of the sun flashed back with that unmistakable splendor and brilliancy that revealed the true nature of the stone, a subdued exclamation of surprise issued from the bushes almost directly above their heads.

Quick as lightning Harry faced in the direction from whence the sound had come, rifle in hand.

A moment later the clatter of horses feet was heard as some one rode rapidly away.

"Quick Tom," cried Harry, "we must get out of here; that fellow saw what you found and he has gone for help. He will return with friends and they will rob us—yes, worse, they will murder us!"

"O Harry! do you think that he saw it? Do you think he knew what it was?" asked the frightened girl.

"Yes, yes; hurry, Tom, hurry! Oh, if we can only get to our horses!"

And he dragged the girl away, regardless of the limbs and thorns that caught and tore her clothes into shreds.

At last, breathless and so exhausted that poor Tom could hardly stand, they arrived at the place where they had left their horses, only to find them gone.

"O God!" cried little Tom, "what shall we do?"

"Do!" exclaimed Harry, "by gosh, I believe that it is a plot planned by that villain Loffden; he's had some one watching us! If 'tis him, they are watching for us

The sharp, whip-like crack of a rifle rang out upon the still air of the mountain dell and, without a murmur, Harry Lovejay staggered forward and fell at the feet of little Tom.

With one wild, despairing cry, Tom fell upon her knees and clasped her arms about her unconscious lover's neck and cried—

"O my God! O my God! He is dead!"

Merciful, indeed, was that veil of unconsciousness which spared her the agony of the cruel parting from the man whom she loved so dearly; for unconsciousness came to her relief.