

CHAPTER XIV.

DEATH OF LOFFDEN.

"Tom," whispered Harry, as that low, ominous sound fell upon their ears. "Tom, they are coming. Promise me, darling, that, whatever happens, you will try to keep up your courage, and remember that I will come for you. Promise me, Tom, for it will help me, and it will help you."

"I promise," she answered.

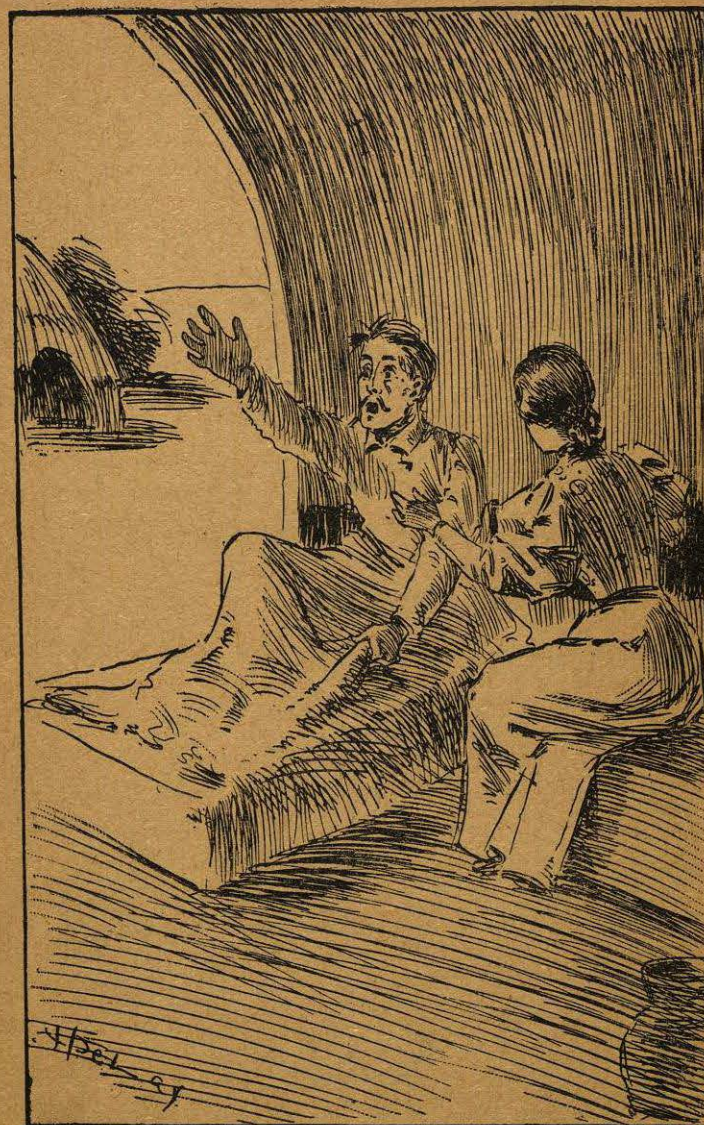
Again came that low, rustling sound? it was nearer now. Nearer and still nearer, till it seemed to the waiting, anxious fugitives that they could reach out their hands and touch the creeping forms that caused it.

Then came a pause. Not a breath stirred, not a leaf quivered; the silence of death reigned for one brief moment; then came a rushing sound, followed by a chorus of wild, shrill yells from the savage Kafirs, as they rushed to the attack.

But clear and distinct above the din of the conflict rose the voice of Silas Loffden in command. Fearful were the oaths which he uttered.

With a revolver in each hand the dauntless Harry met the rush of his oncoming enemies. Quickly discharging his revolvers as best he could in the darkness, which rendered aim uncertain, he fought and struggled like a demon. Quickly emptying his revolvers, he fought his way back step by step till he saw that his only hope to make his escape was to break through the line of

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howling demons that surrounded him, and run for his life.

"Oh, it looks like deserting little Tom," he cried, after falling back for a few yards, fighting desperately at every attack. Tom was already in the hands of the enemy, and the only hope was for Harry to make his escape, that he might come to her rescue.

"If I can get away," he mused, "I will rescue her yet."

"Kill him, kill him!" shouted Loffden. "Don't let him escape! Shoot him, curse the fool Yankee!" And seizing the arm of the terror-stricken girl, he dragged her from her shelter. "Ha, ha, my little beauty, so I have got you again, have I? Come, come, cheer up, darling, don't look so despondent," he said, gloating in his triumph. Then turning to the returning Kafirs, he demanded—

"Where's that Yankee devil? Speak, has he got away?"

"We kill him," answered a Kafir, evasively, "we shoot him an' he run off. Couldn't catch 'im, but me shoot 'im."

"Do you hear that, my dear little Tom? Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord! Ha, ha!" laughed Loffden. "Almighty now! but I will go and cut his heart out and feed it to the dogs, if I were not so lame; Almighty! what a pain I've got in my side where that cursed Yankee kicked me. Oh, but I will have his heart! I will have it; I will have to search his body to get that diamond, and I will have his heart too—curse him, curse him, I say! Yes, I must have that diamond, I'll need it, yes,

"I'll need it! Ho there, Kafir, where's the body? Where's that cursed Yankee? Show me him!" demanded Loffden.

"No find, he run off," said one.

"Almighty!" cried Loffden in alarm. "Did you let him get away? Thunder! But I thought that you killed him!"

"No kill him, he get away," said another.

"Thunderation!" cried Loffden wildly, "let's get away from here. Come, come, lend me a hand, help me on to my horse—God, how my side hurts! I can't ride, you will have to fix the litter again and carry me; let the missy ride my horse. Come, come, carry me to the nearest village—oh, how my side hurts!"

Thus, commanding and pleading, moaning and cursing at every little jolt or jar, they carried him to the nearest village, some three miles away.

It was nearly morning when they reached the village on the knoll. It was a Kafir town, and here Jante was awaiting the return of his master.

Jante, who had received such a terrible blow that night upon the road, from the revolver in the strong hands of Harry Lovejoy, full over the right eye, which had caused the loss of that useful member, had gone to the village the evening before to purchase some provisions and to await Loffden's return or orders to move on and overtake him if he was not successful in capturing the fugitives that night. As he saw the Kafirs returning, bearing Loffden upon the stretcher, he muttered—

"Ah, Boss Silas, the devil has called for you at last,"

and he looked upon the suffering wretch without compassion.

"Oh, you ugly devil!" cried Loffden, as his gaze fell upon the ugly visage of the Kafir. "Get out of here, you devil-cat! But stop, Jante, you must away to Perth and see how things is going there. If old Lovell's Zulu is not dead, as you say, then I need not return there. How far is it, Jante?"

"Three days hard ride," replied Jante in a surly tone.

"Three days! almost a hundred and fifty miles—well you must make it in six days. Now be off, and remember, you ugly devil, six days or, by the eternal, I will maul the liver out of you! Almighty, how my side hurts!" he groaned.

"Curse you, Boss Silas," muttered the unfortunate wretch. "I will pay you for all this yet! I will have that diamond; it's worth a million dollars. Oh, but can't I get gloriously drunk if I had all that money! Yes, I will have it; ha, ha! And so you think to send me away for six days, so's to give you a chance to get away from me, do you? Ah, we shall see, Boss Silas! There's two Dutchmen traders lives down to the next village that I used to know; I'll go and get them to help me—yes, yes, Boss Silas, I will pay you back." And thus he rode away toward Perth.

All day the wretched man lay and groaned. O, what a long, long day it seemed to poor little Tom! Though she was allowed to wander about the village under the ever watchful eye of an old Kafir woman, yet the hours

dragged out their weary length till it seemed the day would never end.

But it was a thousand times worse for the wretched Loffden; for he had rapidly grown worse and worse. That terrible kick in the left side was fast hastening him to eternity. It was several days after receiving it, before he noticed its effects, and then, scarcely noticing it, he had done nothing for it. It was while in pursuit of the fugitives that he had taken cold, and then commenced the trouble in real dead earnest; and it had rapidly grown worse till, upon this day, he had sunk, weak and exhausted, never to rise again.

One great good had resulted from this illness, little Tom was left alone. What might have happened, had it not been for this providential interference, God only knows. Be it as it may, Tom was spared.

Several times during the latter part of the day, he had asked Tom to come and sit beside him, which she did, however distasteful it may have been to her.

Kind-hearted, generous, little Tom could not refuse to administer what little comfort she could to this suffering man, though he was her most deadly enemy.

As night drew on, Tom was given permission to lie down in another room for the night. Thankful, indeed, she was, for she was tired and, as she had been up all the night before, she was soon asleep. But she had not slept long, when Loffden sent for her, asking her to come to him, for he was dying.

"O Tom!" he groaned, as she entered the room, "I am dying!" and almost crazed by the thought of death,

he begged the girl's forgiveness for the great wrong he had done her.

"O Tom!" he moaned, "you think that I am a bad man—yes, I am a bad man; but God made me bad, or the devil made me bad, that I, like all bad men, may show the dark side of life, the very shadows of hell, that the good and the beautiful may be more loved and appreciated. Tom, sweet, beautiful little Tom—hear me, Tom, don't turn away from a dying man, though I don't deserve it—I loved you, as only a bad, passionate man could love. I would have given my life for you. I would have sacrificed the life of any man, yes, of any number of men, for you. But it is all over now. O God!" he wailed, "if I had lived as you have lived; if I had been given, as you were, to Christian parents, I, too, might have lived a happy and useful life. Oh, my side, my side!" he gasped.

For a few minutes it seemed as if every breath would be his last, so terrible was his agony.

Bad man as he was, murderer as he was, one who had robbed her, perhaps for ever, of the man whom she loved; who had, possibly, blasted her every hope; when she looked upon his struggles in that close and, to him, terrible embrace of death—when she heard his horrified cries, which seemed the despairing cry of a lost soul, her heart, never too hard, softened and she pitied him in his misery.

With soft and gentle touch, she nursed him till midnight. Oh, the suffering, so terrible to behold! Writhing in the most excruciating agony, crying continually upon little Tom to save him from the dark horrors of

hell, beseeching her to pray to God for His mercy, to spare his life. It was a scene of suffering, of dark and awful agony of body and soul that no tongue could tell, no pen portray.

"Look! look!" he screamed, closing his eyes to shut out some horrible vision. "Look, they come, they come!" and shivering with terror, his features convulsed beyond all human resemblance, by that unutterable fear brought upon him by his dying vision. He struggled, he raved, he fought with imaginary demons. At last, exhausted and quivering like a leaf in the wind, with the cold perspiration pouring from every pore, and with that wild, inhuman look of a maniac, he fell back upon his bed and cried hoarsely:

"Take her away! Take her away! Curse you; Gretchen Beers, curse you I say. Take your icy fingers away from my throat! Curse you, unhand me, I say; you are choking me! O God! O Tom! Help, help! Murder, murder!" he shrieked.

So awful, so terrible were his cries; so wild and awful were his shrieks for help; so hideous, so fiendish were his looks, and so terrible and wicked were the oaths which he uttered; the imprecations which he hurled upon the imaginary, or perhaps to him real image of Gretchen Beers, the girl whom he had ruined and then murdered; and the legions of gloating demons and devils which, in his fevered imagination, hovered about him, assuming the most hideous forms with gleaming eyes and long, bony, claw-like fingers reaching out to grasp him; so awful, I say, were his looks and cries, that the supersti-

tious natives fled away in terror, leaving poor Tom alone in his awful presence.

Again and again, rang out upon the still midnight air, that awful shriek—"Take her away! Take her away!"

Feebler and feebler grew his voice, till it sunk to a low, hoarse whisper and then ceased altogether. But still his lips moved, though they uttered no sound. His eyes rolled wildly for a moment and then becoming fixed upon some object directly behind little Tom. For an instant there was a still wilder look and followed by such an unearthly shriek—the shriek, perhaps, of a lost soul hurled down into eternity—that fairly froze the blood in the veins of the little watcher. Three times, came the indescribable cry; fainter and fainter each time. The face became almost black, the eyes rolled up, then a convulsive shudder and all was still.

Tom stood as if paralyzed by some awful fear, stood gazing down into that hideous, distorted face, still now in death, when a step sounded behind her. In a moment more two strong arms folded about her and two hot, passionate lips pressed to her own, and she knew that she was held in the strong arms of her lover. O how happy was the thought! How her little heart fluttered, as her golden hair sunk upon his shoulder and she felt his warm passionate kisses upon her pale lips and cheek, at the glad, happy thought that her lover had come back to life, that she was with him again.

"O Tom," he said, referring to the scene which she had just passed through at the bedside of the dying man, "this is awful, this is terrible for such a gentle little girl to endure." And raising her in his strong arms, as

though she were but a child, he bore her into the other room and laying her upon the bed, he said:

"Lie still, Tom, for a little while, while I go and see after Loffden."

In a few minutes he came back, bringing the dead man's revolvers and gun and a goodly supply of ammunition.

"See, Tom," he said, placing the pistols in his belt, "we are armed now. Now we can fight our way back home. But Tom, I couldn't find your diamond; have you got it?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry," she answered, "I have got it. He never took it away from me." And then she told him the story of that awful night.

"Poor, little Tom!" murmured Harry, stroking her golden curls. "Brave little girl! God will remember you for your kindness, even to such a creature as Loffden."

"Ah," sighed Tom, "I know now what it was that he saw just before he died. He was looking at you, Harry."

"Yes," said Harry, "he was looking at me. I had just come in."

"O it was awful!" exclaimed the girl with a shudder at the recollection. "O it was awful to hear him talk of the devils and demons, and of poor Gretchen! He said she was choking him. Oh, how he cursed and swore! And then, at last, he saw you."

"Yes, he saw me, and he thought, I suppose, that it was my spirit come back to torment him. But come, Tom, you are rested a little now; come, I believe that we had better leave here before the people come back,

for there's no telling what they'll do. Does any one know anything about the diamond, Tom?" asked Harry.

"Yes, Jante knows."

"Jante—that's that devil that is always with Loffden?"

"Yes. He is the one that had me on his horse that night that you met us on the road and rescued me. Do you know, Harry, it was that last kick that you gave Loffden that caused his death?"

"No, is that it?" asked Harry.

"Yes, he has been complaining all day about his side," answered Tom.

"Well, he deserves his punishment. But where is Jante? He got over his knock, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Tom, "he got over it, though you knocked his eye out:"

"Gracious, but he must be an ugly looking devil now! Where is he?"

"Oh, he's horrible! Loffden sent him back to Perth to see how things are going there and—"

"Hark! I can hear some one coming," said Harry.

"Oh, it is Jante and somebody else with him. He didn't go back, for Loffden said 'twould take him six days to go there and back. See, they are going to the kraal with their horses. Yes, it is Jante; but who is it with him, I wonder?"

"That's more than I know; but there's one thing sure, they are no friends of ours. Just wait a bit and I'll go and see what's up," said Harry, going out.

Harry was gone but a few minutes, when he returned in haste.

"Quick, Tom!" cried Harry, "we've got no time to loose, come!" and starting out on a run, they set out for the woods.

"Hurry, Tom, hurry!" he whispered, dragging her rapidly on toward the woods. "If we can only reach the woods, we can dodge them. O that infernal dress of yours!" cried Harry. "You can't run with all those measley rags a flopping about your feet! But thank the Lord, a few more such rips as that and it'll be gone," he said, as her dress caught on a limb and tore a breadth or two out of it.

On, on, they flew. Jante and his associates were after them now.