

GOLD!

*A Christmas Story of Table
Mountain.*

By H. P. BARNETT-CLARKE.

Gold! Gold! Gold! Gold!
Bright and Yellow, hard and cold.

Hood

o o o o

Timon What is here? Gold?
Yellow, glittering, precious Gold?

Timon of Athens, iv. 3.

Cape Town :

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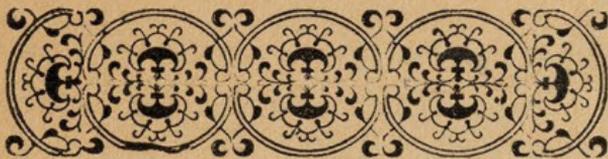
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IT IS WITH MUCH PLEASURE
THAT I INSCRIBE
THIS LITTLE VOLUME
TO THE
MEMBERS
OF THE
MOUNTAIN CLUB.

Cape Town, 1892.

H. P. B.-C.



GOLD!

I.

I am rich, very rich indeed. How I raised my pile is the subject of my narrative for this Christmastide.

But in the first place I must briefly inform my readers that I am not wholly unacquainted with poverty. I have been in pinched pecuniary circumstances myself, although to be sure my friends scarcely credit that true statement. Yes, I am able to feel for the pauper, because, had it not been for the following extraordinary adventure, I might in all probability have been one myself.

Aye! the poor people, God bless and protect them, will not be neglected by me. I flatter myself, moreover, that what I am about to narrate will prove

especially interesting at the present time, when so many folk are occupied in the search for gold, hundreds and hundreds of miles away from their homes. And yet *my* wealth was amassed within four miles of Cape Town with but little personal exertion.

How frequently we hear the remark :—“ That sounds too good to be true.” It is owing to this formula only, which has hitherto prevented me from recording my exciting experiences of the events that led to my ultimate affluence, which I have enjoyed from early manhood to old age. I may mention I am verging on four score and five years. Shall I be believed when you have scanned these words which my pen now traces so feebly ? Possibly yes, probably no. At any rate should I be so fortunate as to arouse your interest I shall not consider my time is expended in vain. Had it not been for the reiterated persuasions of some young friends of mine I would not have undertaken the task. Therefore

if the result be failure or success, to them must be attributed blame or praise.

Ring up the curtain which divides the present from the irrevocable past. An important epoch in the drama of my life is to be re-acted. Let the characters appear as I summon them. Stage-manager, Memory, attend to thy duty.

* * * * *

Recollection carries me back to a certain Christmas Eve in 18— when this century was in its teens, many, many years before diamonds or gold-mines were discovered in South Africa. I was a young medical man residing in the Gardens, near Mill-street, about a mile from Cape Town. I had been little more than four months in the Colony, when I married a young lady of no fortune, but of good family, Miss———, but stay, it is not necessary to name her.

I had a horse and trap, certainly, also a man to attend to them, but it was a difficult matter to find work for man and

beast. Truth will out. I had but *five* patients. Everyone else who fell ill persisted in patronising my hateful rival, old Dr. Grumble, who resided a quarter of a mile from my house. Hence it became absolutely essential that I should advertise myself, and I did so by driving recklessly about the town with Billy, my horse, at "full speed ahead." In fact it appeared as if I were perpetually endeavouring to overtake Father Time. No galloping consumption could have proceeded more rapidly than Billy. I tried to look very wise, but whether I was successful I cannot say. Anyhow I thought it as well to deserve golden opinions, even though, alas, the golden guineas were denied me.

On this memorable Christmas Eve, the first of my married life—how vividly I recollect the circumstance!—some friends "dropped in" for a chat, some music, and a game of whist. One old bachelor friend, Reginald Gordon, was singing a Christmas carol—"Good King

Wenceslas." My wife accompanied him on her guitar. Pianos were not so cheap or so plentiful in those far-off days as they have since become. I chanced to be playing whist "by special request." My partner played atrociously—it is invariably one's partner who is the delinquent!—and we lost trick after trick. I was not very heart-broken, therefore, when we heard four or five imperative, staccato-like knocks—no, they were not knocks, but bangs on my front door. "King Wenceslas" was immediately dethroned from his command over our attention, the cards were dropped, and we gazed at one another with astonishment depicted on our countenances.

"Wonder who it is?" said Gordon. "Doors must be pretty cheap wherever that chap hails from. I expect it is someone for you, Bob," he went on, addressing me. "What a roaring trade yours must be, old man!" I did not undeceive him.

"One of my patients, I suppose," answered I, carelessly,

just as if it were a nightly occurrence for me to be disturbed at that hour—it was then ten o'clock. Our coloured domestic entered the room, her face beaming with radiant smiles. *She* knew how scarce patients were.

“What is it, Setje?” queried my wife. “A pashunt, mum. Says he must see de baas at once.”

“Show him into the consulting-room,” I remarked with a nonchalant air. “I’ll be there directly.” Setje departed.

“What a nuisance!” exclaimed my wife. “He might have chosen a more convenient time.”

“A clergyman’s and a doctor’s time, my dear,” I hastened to inform her in particular and our guests in general, “is never at their own disposal. They should always be prepared to sacrifice self at the shrine of—ur—r—Inconvenience, and to fly on the winged wheels of—of—of Duty—and—and—all that kind of thing, you know.”

“There,” said she, more sharply than I ever heard her speak

before — that, too, I vividly remember! — “there, now, do be quiet, Bob. We have no inclination to listen to one of your second-hand prosy sermons, excellent as they are. Go and ‘sacrifice yourself at the shrine of Inconvenience,’ and when you return we will have some refreshment, and exchange Christmas greetings.”

I left the room after that.

I opened the door of my consulting room, wondering to what class of society my unexpected nocturnal visitor might belong. The lamp was burning dimly. I turned up the wick, and by the additional light perceived a slovenly-attired, vulgar-looking man, apparently between thirty-five and forty years of age. His face, if any index to his character, expressed dauntless, dogged courage, combined with an insolent bearing, which made me long to shake him. He wore a black beard, flecked here and there with silvery hairs. His shoulders, though brawny and broad, were awkward and clumsy,

giving one the impression that he was more accustomed to lifting and carrying heavy weights than to exercise his mental faculties. The sequel proved I was correct.

The stranger sat on the table with his hands deep in his trousers' pockets, swinging his legs backwards and forwards in strict time to the merry air he was whistling.

"Good evening," I said, "I believe you wish to see me?"

"Yes," came the answer in a deep voice.

"Won't you sit down on a *chair*?" I continued, with an unmistakable emphasis on the last word.

"No, I'm all square, don't worrit about me. Sit you down and listen to what I've to tell you."

I was about to resent such a reversal of the order of etiquette, when the mysterious individual again addressed me.

"Say, s'pose you won't objec' to me smokin'?"

"Smoke!" I exclaimed;
"why?"

“’Cause, d’ye see, I can allus get my h’idears to run more ship-shape like.”

“Then I suppose you had better smoke.”

He no sooner received my sanction than he whipped out his pipe, knocked out the ashes on the carpet—my pretty new carpet too!—replenished the bowl with some coarse black tobacco abstracted from his waistcoat pocket, and lighted up.

“Ah! that’s better,” he grunted. For quite three minutes he puffed away in silence. Then, having looked steadily at me, as if wondering how far he could trust me, he said, “Are you the doctor?”

“I am.”

“So much the better,” was the surly response. “I want you to come along with me an’ see to my father. Old boy has had a haxident.”

“What has happened to him?”

“S’pose you come an’ see,” he answered flippantly.

“If you give me his address,”

I replied coldly, "I will start immediately."

"His address!" cried the stranger, giving vent to a coarse chuckle. "No, no; if I gave it you, you would never find him. You must go with me, I can't take no refusal."

"Indeed! And suppose I decline to go with you," I said in my iciest tone.

"You have only to say the word an' I go an' knock up old Dr. What's-'is-name. I reckon *he* won't say no."

He jumped off the table as he uttered these words, and put on his greasy wide-awake hat as an intimation to me that our interview was about to be abruptly terminated.

"Stop, stop," I cried, "do not be so hasty, man; I will go with you, but I must first of all tell my wife, and explain to my friends why——"

"No need to tell your wife," interrupted my unwelcome visitor, "if you are ready start with me now. Oh," he continued with a grin, "I see how the wind is, you are lookin' after

the rhino, quite right too, s'pose you take that as a *feeler*," and he pitched before my astonished eyes a bar of pure gold on the table which left a dent on the polished mahogany surface which may be seen to this day.

"Who on earth are you?" I enquired in sheer amazement.

"That has nothin' to do with our business. Are you ready? If you are—tramp, if not, say so."

"I must tell my wife."

The stranger stamped in his impatience.

"Oh, you must, must you?" he returned with a sneer. "Why, man," he continued, addressing me with more animation than I thought him capable of exhibiting, "why, man, I can give you a hundred bits of stuff like that," pointing to the shining metal on the table—"and never feel a penny the poorer. I've as much gold as would buy the new Queen of England a crown for every day in the week. Just think, the love of GOLD 'gainst the love of a WIFE; it don't

take a Sol'mon to tell you which to choose, does it?"

"Enough, I will accompany you." To my shame be it known the love of a golden adventure, and this surely promised to be one, triumphed over the right, prudent and honourable counsel of my conscience. Conscience, that guardian angel who truly makes cowards of us all when we are tempted to err. Pardon this moralising digression; remember 'tis a failing of old age to be garrulous. To resume.

"Right you are!" almost shouted this mysterious stranger, poking me familiarly in the chest with the stem of his pipe, a liberty I took care to let him see was resented. "Right you are, bring your tools along, for I bet you'll 'ave some cuttin' to do 'fore mornin.'"

"I will just order my trap to be got ready, and then——"

"Fshaw!" broke in this black-bearded individual contemptuously, "there's no trap built that can take you where I go. Come," he continued, opening

the door, "I can't be hangin' about 'ere all night."

We stepped into the hall. Mechanically I took down my hat, telling the stranger to remain where he was while I fetched my travelling instrument case. I returned to the room we had quitted, and tearing a leaf out of my pocket-book scribbled hastily in pencil: "Am called away suddenly. Not likely I shall be home until to-morrow." Having signed this memorandum and found my case of instruments, which I strapped round my shoulders, I rejoined my uncouth visitor. We gained the front door, walking on tip-toe: the drawing-room was in close proximity thereto.

We sallied forth. The stranger slouched his greasy wide-awake over his shaggy brows, and beckoned me to follow him. I did so without a word.



II.

The fellow walked rapidly ; indeed I found it no little exertion to keep pace with him.

We proceeded in silence towards Table Mountain, meeting few persons *en route*, and they appeared to be quite as anxious to avoid us as we were to avoid them.

At length having arrived at the site upon which, in these days, the Wash-houses have been erected, my guide halted. We turned and faced the sea. It was a most magnificent moonlight night. The moon cast her beams upon the glass-like water, revealing twenty-three ships riding quietly at anchor (there were no steamers in those days). Whilst we gazed on the picturesque scene, a full-rigged East Indiaman was slowly entering the harbour, fanned by a gentle

breeze. Her sails shone like silver. Cape Town appeared to be entirely forsaken. We seemed to be the only two living beings on the steep mountain slopes. Suddenly there was a loud report, which for a minute or two went reverberating up the clefts, gullies and gorges of the noble old mountain and Devil's Peak, awakening the "slumb'ring echoes" far and wide. It was from the ship we had watched approaching "Afric's shores" and which thus signalled her arrival to the peaceful citizens of the town. I looked at my watch; it was a quarter to twelve. My thoughts sped home to dear old England, where, on previous Christmas Eves, I had gone the rounds of my native parish carol-singing with the village choir. We usually started at that hour. My taciturn companion, who had not ceased polluting the atmosphere with his vile tobacco since he lit his pipe in my consulting room—how I longed to be back in it!—sat on a rock watching the smoke

as it curled slowly upwards in tiny clouds which the stillness of the night was unable to dispel. What cared *he* for the picturesque scene before him, or indeed, whether it happened to be Christmas Eve or not? It occurred to me that I had not asked his name; I enquired forthwith.

“Ben Ronner. Come, we must move. Here, I’ll take your box. I see you aint used to mountain-climbin’.” I was only too thankful to transfer the burden.

For twenty-minutes we toiled onwards and upwards. The mountain was more wooded than it is now.

At Platte Klip we again halted. Ben produced a flask of brandy and water. He handed it to me saying, “You’d best take a pull, you’ll need it ’fore you’ve jobbed this job.”

I complied. But there was a much larger quantity of brandy than water. I returned him the vessel with the tears in my eyes. He seized it eagerly, and nodding carelessly to me, re-

marked briefly, "here's luck," and tossed the contents down his capacious throat with evident relish.

For ten minutes we strode on amidst stumpy bushes and through thick sand. Ben then arrested my further progress by grasping my arm with his muscular hand, and putting his fingers to his mouth whistled shrilly. After pausing a few moments I was greatly surprised to perceive two mules, ready caparisoned, come trotting up to us.

"Whose are these?" I asked of my reticent guide.

"Ask no questions. Mount."

He quickly caught one of the animals and held it by the bridle until I was firmly seated. I observed that the mule I bestrode was furnished with a leading-rein. Having satisfied himself that I was comfortably settled, Ben speedily followed my example. As he stuck his feet into the stirrups he remarked: "I must blind-fold you, young feller."

“I decline to be blindfolded,” I returned warmly, “Who is to do it?”

“Me,” was the calm ungrammatical rejoinder, as with dexterous hand he guided his animal towards mine, which had walked a few paces in advance. In an instant Ben’s coat was flung over my head and shoulders. I was seized, my hands were securely lashed together with a fathom of rope, doubtless provided for that purpose. It was useless struggling, though I vainly attempted to pull my hands out of the lashing. A red cotton handkerchief was bound round my eyes. The villain laughed, but uttered not a word. For nearly three-quarters of an hour we continued our ascent. Now to the right, now to the left, in a zig-zag mode of progression until I grew confused and lost all idea of the direction in which we were proceeding. Of one thing I was conscious, viz: —That I could do little else than keep my seat. I endeavoured to form some idea of the

patient into whose presence I was soon to be ushered. Who was he? What was he? Why all this mystery? Would it be my good fortune to reach home with a whole skin?

My gloomy reflections were roughly dispelled by Ben who, without any warning, pulled up the mules so sharply that I was almost precipitated headforemost on *terra firma*. Quite close to us I was somewhat startled to hear voices evidently belonging to the stern sex.

“Who are those men?” I asked.

“Hush! They are my mates comin’ to meet us. Let me give you a bit of advice, doctor; it is this: don’t rile them whatever you do; they are rough chaps, and won’t stand being cheeked. Be very careful what you say, don’t ask any questions and all will be well, nothin’ shall ’appen to you. Sh-sh, here they are.”

“Hulloa! Ben,” cried a clear voice, “did you bring Saw-bones?”

“That’s you,” said Ben *sotto voce* to me. “Yes,” he continued aloud, “who else should I bring? Do you think I went cruisin’ to town for to fetch a Archbishop, or a Brigadier-Gen’ral? Which? You bet I’ve got Sawbones safe enough, gear an’ all.”

“Well done,” remarked someone else, approvingly, “I could ’ave took my davy you wouldn’t ’ave done it, Ben.”

“No more I wouldn’t if I’d ’ad your slow wits, Bill Flinders,” returned the amiable Ben. “He wanted a ’eap of persuadin! How’s the Cap’en?”

“’Bout the same, answered a third voice, “he aint no better an’ he aint no wusser.”

“Get down,” said the first speaker, addressing me.

I did so.

Two men immediately took possession of either arm and led me forward about forty yards. We then entered a subterranean passage, at least so it seemed to me. We turned twice or thrice and stopped. The man who grasped my left arm observed:

“Look out for goin’ down stairs.”

And to my amazement down several stairs we did go; I counted fifty-four. Having proceeded a short distance further we halted once more. I heard somebody say in an authoritative tone:

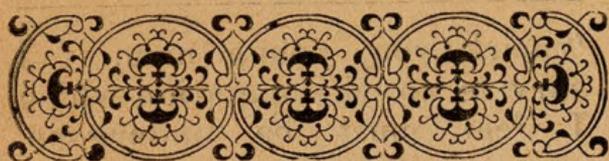
“Set his hands free.” The rope which bound my wrists tightly together was severed by a keen knife.

“Take off the handkerchief from his eyes.” The command was instantly obeyed. Next moment I was dazzled by a blaze of light from many candles. I closed my eyes to exclude the glare. By slow degrees I regained my vision, and this is what I saw:—Upon a wooden stretcher was lying an aged man. He wore a long, flowing white beard. He appeared to be suffering extreme pain, for he held his right arm, which was awkwardly bound up with soiled rags, against his chest, as if to soothe its tumultuous throbbing. Upon a rudely-constructed table beside the couch stood a jug

containing water, and next to it a cracked tumbler. In marked contrast to the poverty-stricken appearance of the place in one portion of the cave, was the accumulation of fabulous wealth in another, for there were heaped up like so much lumber, hundreds of bars and wedges of gold and ingots, which flashed in the candle-light, and assisted to illuminate the striking scene.

“Where am I?” cried I in astonishment. “Surely I must be dreaming!”

“No, you are not dreaming, doctor,” answered the old man, and methought the voice sounded not unkindly, “you are in a cavern of treasure—that’s all.”



III.

The Captain, for so I suspected him of the ancient appearance to be, intimated by a gesture that I was to approach his bedside. I obeyed. Touching his wounded arm, he said, "As you perceive, I have met with an accident. You must try and put it to rights, though I greatly fear it is too badly broken for you to effect that; if so, amputate it to relieve my agony, and save my life before mortification sets in." He bent a searching look upon me with eyes penetrating as those of an eagle on the look out for prey. "Whatever your professional knowledge suggests do immediately, and, if you are successful, you shall receive a fee for this night's work which will exceed your wildest dreams. But," he went on impressively,

“ mark you, young man, if I survive not the operation which I feel must be undergone, you —— ”

“ He dies ! ” boomed the deep voices of the gang who just then entered. There were four men, exclusive of the Captain or chief; wild, grisly-looking fellows they were too. Against such summary judgment as this I had not a word to say. I was entirely at their mercy.

In profound silence I unrolled the bandage from the arm and examined the member with, I need scarcely say, the most scrupulous attention. My life I knew would be forfeited if he died while under my hands.

“ Well,” said my patient, “ how now ? ”

“ Your arm,” I replied, “ is badly fractured in three places ; the bone has —— ”

“ I could have told you that,” was the testy interruption.

“ It will,” I continued, “ be necessary for you to lose it.”

“ Then, doctor, you may as well bring your skill to bear at

once. You are perfectly sure you cannot set it?"

"Positive, no medical man could."

"Then cut. It has been a serviceable arm. Are you ready? I shan't flinch."

In due time, aided by Ronner and Flinders, I had amputated the useless limb. It soon became manifest, however, that the Captain could ill afford to lose so large a quantity of blood. He grew gradually weaker and weaker. I sat by his side. The sailors, for such I conjectured them to be, stood at the foot of the couch waiting for the end. I noticed many significant, ominous glances in my direction. I had determined to strike some blows for dear life, though I well knew how trifling my strength would prove pitted against the tough muscles of these hardy treasure-trover.

But at 6 o'clock on Christmas morning, to the surprise of all, to none more than myself, the sufferer rallied, and though still feverish, was evidently better, and felt, comparatively speaking,

free from pain. He began to amend.

Thoroughly wearied with my unwonted clamber up the mountain, and all the excitement I had endured, I stretched myself on a leopard skin Ben Ronner brought me, and in a few minutes was oblivious to all my surroundings in a state of peaceful slumber. I slept until 11 o'clock, when I was awakened by hearing somebody whisper, "Is he awake?"

I immediately feigned sleep.

"No," answered Ronner, who was lying beside me on one side whilst Flinders, who was still sound asleep, occupied a similar recumbent position on the other. Andrews was busy preparing that matutinal meal not unfamiliarly known as breakfast.

"No, he's not awake, mate. I've just roused up myself. He's good for another two hours yet."

Wrong for once, Mr. Ronner!

"That's all square, then," said Gray, for he it was. "You know what our next job is?"

“ Not me, I hadn't the chance of a palaver with the Cap'en last night, he was too done up.”

“ Well, I'll tell you how things is.” Gray then proceeded to inform Ronner that about an hour after his departure the previous evening on his mission to fetch me, the Captain summoned the three of them to his bedside. He said he had hit upon a capital plan for stealing away unperceived with their treasure. He would submit the scheme for their approval. Briefly stated it was as follows :—

It seems the men in order to avoid suspicion were desirous of removing their golden harvest in large chests for transmission to the ship. It would be the height of folly to carry it about in sacks. They required a house in a quiet neighbourhood where they could pack the gold at their leisure and send it on board as ordinary luggage. The problem to be solved was, where were they to find a suitable house? To hire one for a couple of days for two men who were perfect strangers, who

possessed neither furniture nor servants, who would scarcely go out except at night (when they went to the cavern to fetch more gold), and who, when they returned, would be joined by two companions each man carrying a sack, would be sure to provoke attention. The only solution of the difficult proposition was this: Supposing Ronner was successful in obtaining a doctor to accompany him to the cavern and attend to the Captain's injured limb, after it had been amputated, or prescribed for with a view to its ultimate recovery, as the case might be, the disciple of Æsculapius was to be detained. They would then compel him to give them a written document certifying that he experienced great pleasure — as he undoubtedly would, well knowing that if he refused his life must be forfeited — in placing his house at their disposal for a few days during his temporary absence. Two men were to remain in the cavern to see he did not escape and also to attend

to the Captain. Ronner and Gray, armed with the certificate of authority, signed by the doctor, empowering them to make his house their home, were to proceed thither, where they would at once pack the precious metal in five cases. On the day the vessel was appointed to sail the doctor (alas! my unlucky self) would be left to find his way out of the cavern as best he might. Meanwhile the Captain and his two satellites would proceed on board, and mingle with their quondam comrades, who were to be held responsible for the safe custody of their valuable charge, as strangers. When the ship reached port they would separate and go their several ways, each man with his box of gold which would be equally divided. Nobody in Cape Town would be a whit the wiser that bullion to the tune of thousands and thousands of pounds had been taken out of their beloved Table Mountain within four miles of the city; almost, indeed, under their very eyes!

Ben, when he heard of this well-laid plot, chuckled in high glee. "I reckoned myself," said he, "a smart man, but I'm a fool to the old 'un."

"We're to take four sacks of gold with us," continued Gray, "two of ingots, one of bars, an' t'other of wedges."

"Ay, ay, that's all serene, but who's goin' to get 'old of Sawbones' house?"

"You."

"Yes, it's always me when there's a ticklish job on 'and. You chaps ain't worth your salt, not you. It's Ben for this, Ben for that, an' Ben for everythink."

"The skipper said you was the only one amongst us who could do it," returned Gray, apologetically. "You see, mate, you've such a nice, takin' way with you. You've got more brains than the lot of us strung together, you 'ave."

"That's true enough," replied Ben, bluntly, "I might 'ave known that. If it weren't for me, I reckon you'd all be adrift,

every mother's son of you. What about this coon's wife?"

"His wife! Didn't know he had one. You'll have to bring her along, there's no 'elp for it."

Good gracious! Could I believe my ears?

"Oh, anythink else, just in a small way, Albert Gray?"

"Yes, Andrews an' Flinders is to go with me an' you an' lend us a 'and. They'll come back to-night to look after the young spark."

"I must see the Cap'en 'bout this here job," said Ben, slowly rising to his feet, "an' then we'll 'ave breakfust." He awoke Flinders, and requested that worthy to go with him and interview their chief.

"You'd best stir up this joker, too," said Gray, referring to me, "or he'il sleep his 'ead off."

"Rouse him up yourself, can't you?" was Ben's peevish retort, as he and Flinders made their way into the adjoining cave.

Gray approached me and dug his iron-tipped right foot into my ribs. This is a method quite antagonistic to Somnus, and

compels that monarch to abdicate his imperial sway over our faculties. True, it failed to awake me, but that can be easily accounted for—I was not asleep.

Gray brought me a bucketful of water, a morsel of yellow soap, and a piece of sacking to do duty as towel. When I had performed my ablutions, he craved the pleasure of my company in the next apartment, so that I might announce my opinion as to the patient's state of health since his operation. I condescended for obvious reasons to accede to his request.

There lay the Captain in the same position as I had left him. Grouped round his couch stood Ronner, Flinders, Andrews and Gray, all five engaged in earnest conversation. They ceased abruptly when I entered. Leaning against the cavern were ranged four sacks filled with gold.

I found the cause of my incarceration better than I had anticipated. I urged upon him the necessity of complete rest. He would not hear of it.

“Stand there,” said he imperiously, pointing to the foot of his couch.

I obeyed.

“Listen to me. We want you to deliver up your house to us for two or three days——”

“Impossible,” I interrupted, “I shall never consent to so monstrous a proposal.”

“Don’t be a fool, doctor. It shall be done. You must write a paper to that effect. Ronner tells me you are married?”

“I am.”

“Then you must write to your wife, and instruct her to come here at once, do you hear? —at once. Ben will take the letter. Tell her she must follow him in silence.”

“What!” I exclaimed, provoked beyond measure, “to be brought here amongst such a rascally set of villains as you and your men are? Never!”

“Softly, young man. Do not let the heat of anger cause you to lose the cool control of your better judgment. I am not accustomed to being addressed in so passionate a manner, and

there are those here who will not see me so treated by a boy of your years. With reference to your wife, I give her a safe conduct ; she shall not be molested, I pledge you my honour."

"Your honour !" I repeated in disdain.

"Come, come," returned the hoary-headed chief, irritably, "I am not to be insulted with impunity. If you refuse, I'll have her dragged here by the very mule you rode last night. Be wise in time. Give up your house to us, you will have careful tenants and enormous rentage."

I pondered over my embarrassing situation, and was obliged to confess I had no alternative but to act as was suggested.

"So be it," I answered gloomily.

I tore two leaves out of my pocket-book. One I scribbled to my wife ; it is still in her possession, and lies before me on the table. There is no occasion for me to give it word for word. I need merely mention that I

entreated her to follow Ben Ronner, who would guide her to me. She was not to speak a word to him or anybody else, but simply to come and all would, perhaps, yet be well.

My second literary production was dictated by the Captain. I assured anybody who might read it what intense pleasure it afforded me to be able to lend my house to my two friends—the scoundrels!—Ronner and Gray, for a few days during my temporary absence in the country. The Captain having perused both missives, handed them to Ben, who vouchsafed no remark. With him silence was truly golden.

Our business having been transacted to the Captain's satisfaction, we all sat down to breakfast. The viands would scarcely have tempted an epicure. There were tough chops, coffee without milk, and a coarse loaf of brown bread. As can be imagined, my state of mind choked off what appetite I might have had under more fortunate circumstances. The

Captain had a hunk of bread and some coffee, which Ronner conveyed to him. The men ate like famished wolves. When the repast was concluded the ubiquitous, indefatigable Ronner ostentatiously placed beside the Captain a pistol, glancing significantly at me.

Certainly, that man seemed to remember everything. He then with much difficulty hoisted one of the heavy sacks on his broad back and staggered away with it. Andrews, Gray and Flinders followed him bearing similar burdens.

“Sit down here near me,” said the Captain, pointing to a small upturned cask. “You have no occasion to look so miserable; you and your wife will receive every attention whilst with us.”

I remained silent.

“This is Christmas Day,” he went on, “a day for driving away dull care; so cheer up, doctor, cheer up. Perhaps you find it slightly different to last 25th December?”

“Vastly different,” I replied cuttingly. How happy I was in old England!

“Perhaps you went to church,” suggested the old man, ignoring my sarcasm.

“To be sure.”

“So did I.”

“You!” I exclaimed incredibly.

“Yes, why not? Suppose I give you a brief account of my life and how I happened to come here?”

“There is nothing I should like better, but at present you are too weak to talk.”

“You must know,” he began, unheeding my interruption, “I was born in Boston and spent the greater part of my life in America. Last year I went to Australia to visit a married daughter. I remained with her until the sixteenth of July, when I left for my own home. We arrived here a few days ago. Having frequently heard of Table Mountain I determined to climb to the summit or at any rate as high as I could; I have done a good deal of mountain-

eering in my young days. My fellow-passengers ridiculed the idea on account of my age—I am seventy-four years old. However, I started the following morning at 4 o'clock. I must not tell you the way we came, it would not do to give you a clue, though I dare say you would not be much the wiser if I did."

"Who are the men you have with you?" I enquired.

"Andrews was a second-class passenger, Flinders I heard of in Cape Town, he agreed to be our guide. Gray and Ronner are sailors, they belonged to the ship. I obtained leave for them to accompany us and carry the provisions. We had left Cape Town about two hours and were a considerable height up the mountain when we were dismayed to see the South-easter cloud come rolling down the steep ascent towards us. Flinders at once advised us to retrace our steps, but it was too late. In five minutes we were caught and enveloped in the mist, and for a considerable time we wandered about trying

to find the narrow path which we had somehow inadvertently quitted. At length we despaired, and were about to hold a consultation as to what was to be done, when Gray asked, 'Where is Ronner?' Nobody knew. It was impossible to see more than four feet away in that drenching, drifting cloud. We shouted for him until we were hoarse. I reproached myself as being the originator of this apparent luckless expedition. However, in less than ten minutes what was our joy to hear him calling to us, 'Come here, Cap'en'—he called me 'Cap'en' from the first, the men now address me by that title—'I have found a cave we can all shelter in quite snug an' comfer'ble - like.' Guided by his voice we soon found him.

"Well, there we remained until the South-easter had blown itself out. I believe it is no uncommon occurrence to experience that violent wind two or three times a week during certain months of the year. The cave was pitch dark.

Ronner extemporised a torch by fastening a piece of paper, which he moistened with some brandy I had in my flask, round his stick. We came to the steps you descended last night."

"Do you think those men who originally constructed this hiding-place will eventually return?" asked I, greatly interested.

"No, no, it has not been touched for years and years. It was filled with leaves and other *débris*. We found four spades and three pickaxes of old-fashioned make, eaten by rust. Andrews picked up a Dutch coin bearing date 1690."

"How do you account for the treasure being here?"

"That question perplexed me exceedingly. I thought over the circumstance again and again without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. It occurred to me that by going to town I might possibly glean information on the subject from some trustworthy person who would be likely to give me particulars of this long-concealed

wealth. I broached the matter to Flinders who readily consented to present me to a gentleman in an official position whom he knew to be thoroughly well-versed in all events appertaining to this Colony. Yesterday morning Flinders and I went to town. In the afternoon I made the acquaintance of Mr———. I told him I was a stranger in South Africa, and that I was thinking of writing a book on incidents connected with the Cape Peninsula. Could he tell me anything that might be interesting? To be sure, he could, and proceeded to glibly narrate several trivial matters which convinced me that my query was not a novel one, and had been answered in a similar manner dozens of times before. When my informant had spoken on nearly every subject but the one in which I was principally interested, I asked him if there had not been any shipwrecks in or near Table Bay of vessels known to contain bullion. He looked, I thought, rather suspiciously at me."

“What makes you ask that question?”

“Mere curiosity.”

“A ship,” he replied, “known to have contained vast treasure went ashore near the mouth of Salt River. Her name was the ————. I will just turn up the particulars.” He fetched a M.S. book, and having found the place, handed it to me. I made a copy of the record, here it is. Read it aloud.”

I took the slip of paper and was about to do as I was commanded when the Captain asked me to give him some brandy, as he felt faint after the exertion of talking. Having administered to his wants, I sat down again and read as follows:—“The barque———, belonging to the Dutch East India Company, was wrecked towards the close of the seventeenth century on the Blauwberg beach, near the mouth of Salt River. She carried treasure of immense value, a large portion of which she brought from the East Indies, and the remainder she captured from an American

pirate that attacked her, and which the ——— not only repelled, but, after a desperate fight, actually vanquished. The Captains of both vessels were killed. The piratical craft was boarded and scuttled as soon as her precious freight had been transferred to the Indiaman. This memorable engagement took place off the coast of Brazil. The ——— reached Table Bay on the night of the ———, and was blown ashore during a heavy north-westerly gale. She had lost so large a number of men in the conflict with the pirate that there were not sufficient hands to work the ship. The mates and five of the crew perished. The butcher was saved. He reported that nine sailors and the carpenter took to the boats. They told him they were going off with as much of the bullion as they could, with safety, stow in the boats, and requested him to join them. He refused, whereupon the ring-leader struck him on the head. He fell on the deck senseless. When he recovered conscious-

ness the men had abandoned the ship. Being naturally anxious to save his own life he gave no further thought to the specie that remained, but having lashed himself to a piece of wreckage, threw himself into the sea and was drifted ashore. The sailors succeeded in getting away with their rich booty, but were caught on Table Mountain two weeks later. They resolutely refused to tell where they had concealed the spoil, thinking, doubtless, they would be liberated after a severe flogging and imprisonment; when they had served their time they would be free to repair to their treasure-house and share their ill-gotten gains. But the Honourable Company acted otherwise, and had them all executed.'

I folded up the paper and returned it to its owner.

"What do you think of it?" asked he.

"It is very interesting."

"Have you any more questions to ask?"

"Several, but I must advise

you to try and get to sleep. Your arm——”

“No, no, I enjoy our chat; it is a pleasure for me to converse once more with someone of education. What do you wish to know?”

“How did you break your arm?”

“Coming down the stairs yesterday evening on my way back from town I tripped and fell nine or ten steps. That accounts for your presence here.”

“Are you not alarmed lest somebody might find out this place and oust you from it?”

“No fear of that; a regiment might pass the spot and suspect nothing.”

“Still,” I argued, “someone may stumble across it as Ronner did.”

The old man's eyes glittered with a dangerous light as he replied, “He or she who did stumble across us would never leave here again. In fact, doctor, had it not been for Ronner having blind-folded you I should not have consented to *your* leaving

here alive after you had attended to my arm. As you grow older you will notice, as a rule, that a man who has had a long and severe struggle in battling with the world for a living—nay, even an existence, as I have done—and who unexpectedly finds or inherits great wealth, is very jealous of every stiver and clutches his money-bags in a miserly grasp. He is suspicious of his most intimate friend robbing him.”

“How much gold is stored here?”

“I think about twelve sacks full of solid gold, more than sufficient to purchase and equip at least fifteen of the largest English frigates. The ingots, wedges and bars which have been taken to your house make, as you perceive, but little perceptible difference in the quantity which yet remains. There are also some bags of dollars and doubloons.”

“Do many picnic parties come in this direction?”

“I think not. This spot is rather out of their track.”

"May I ask where you procured your mules?"

"Flinders and I bought them yesterday for a small nugget. I thought they would be useful in carrying the gold to your house."

"What about the ship which brought you here?"

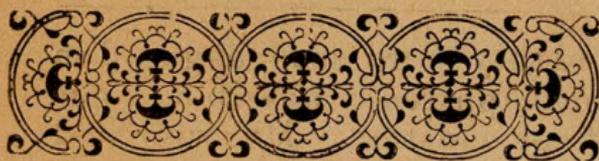
"Ronner told me she sailed the day before yesterday. The Captain had a fair wind, and as we were not on board at the appointed hour he refused to wait for us."

"One more question, it is my last. How do you get your candles and other necessaries?"

"Andrews or Flinders go down to town for them at night."

Here our conversation terminated. As I had foreseen, the Captain was thoroughly wearied. I smoothed his pillow and made him as comfortable as I could, and then paced restlessly to and fro waiting for the advent of my wife, and wondering with what new trick fickle Fortune would persecute me.

Soon after 1 o'clock I heard footsteps, and a minute or two later my wife was led in.



IV.

The bandage round her eyes was taken off. Next moment we were in each other's arms.

"Oh, Bob," she cried, "where are we? I thought I should have died. What could have possessed you to come to this awful place?"

"It was to relieve my pain, madame," answered the Captain, "that your husband was induced to favour me with a professional visit."

"Then," said she, "of course it was his duty, and I must not complain."

"You are very good, madame. I shall prove a paying patient. I wish to speak a few words to your escort, and I am sure you must be longing to see and talk to your husband."

When we were out of earshot Ronner strode up to the Captain,

and they were soon engaged in some apparently absorbing topic of conversation. My wife told me how anxious she had been concerning me since I left the house the previous night. It seems Gordon and our other friends waited for me until midnight, and then took their departure, greatly to her relief. She hurried to the consulting-room and tapped at the door. Receiving no reply, she entered and found my hastily-jotted lines, telling her not to expect me until next day. This relieved her anxiety for a time. At 11 o'clock Ben asked to see her and delivered my note. She immediately set out for the subterranean chamber, where she now found herself.

The Captain and Ben continued their *tête-a-tête* some time after we had concluded ours. By their hushed voices and frequent glances in our direction, we had good reason to believe that something else remained for us to do or to suffer. Ben appeared to be vehemently urging some measure which did not find a

ready seconder in his chief, who evinced his dissent by vigorous shakes of the head. However, the interview was at last terminated, and Ronner gave us some refreshment at the command of his "cap'en." He then left the cave, scowling at me.

"Can you guess," asked the Captain, looking intently at us, "what Ben Ronner has been saying?"

"No," answered I, "I have not the slightest idea."

"Well, I will tell you; he has begged me to have you both put to death."

"Put to death?" I exclaimed, horrified. "You dare not."

"Daren't I?" was the ironical rejoinder. "Why not? Who would know it? None of your friends would be a bit the wiser. Even if they searched for you on the mountain they would never think of looking *in* it."

"But why does he want to murder us?" asked my wife.

"Because, madame," answered the old fellow, sternly, "he tells

me when he blind-folded you on your way hither you contrived to slip off the bandage he tied round your eyes, and thus you can find your way into this place without a guide ; is that so ? ”

“ Yes, certainly, ” she answered boldly. My patient stared, as well he might. “ Your man should have looked after me better ; he did not notice until near the cave that I had managed to pull the handkerchief off. He put it on again when I dismounted. From Platte Klip the path is easy to hit. You keep to the left until—— ”

“ Silence ! woman, ” he thundered, “ if any of the men were to hear you they would kill you at once. What made you take it off ? ”

“ A woman’s curiosity. ”

“ Now, listen to what I have to say. This is Ronner’s own gold cave ; he found it, and of course he can do what he likes with it, isn’t that so ? ”

“ To be sure, ” I acknowledged. I felt I must say something.

“ Very well then. I was, against my own wishes, elected

chief or leader or Captain, as I am commonly designated, of these men. They promised to accept my decisions in any disputes as final. But in an important matter of this sort it is necessary that the others should be summoned and decide whether your lives are to be spared or not. I am inclined to spare them."

"Where are the men?" I asked.

"At your house ; Ben was so annoyed that he swore he would not rest, eat nor drink until he had brought them here to decide the question."

"Can't *you* save us?" I asked.

"Impossible."

"But," I went on, "suppose we both vowed never to set foot on the mountain again?"

"They would not believe you. Man thirsts for gold, gold, gold more than anything else in the world, for with it he can do almost everything : without it—nothing. You must wait until Ronner returns. The next cave is at your disposal."

This was such a broad hint to be gone that we had no other course open but to take our *congé*.

We remained in the cave for nearly an hour. The suspense was dreadful.

"Bob," said my wife at last, "do you think you could ascertain what our host is doing?"

"He may not like to have his privacy intruded upon," I answered, "nevertheless I must say I should like to have an inquisitive peep."

I took off my shoes and stole noiselessly to the cave. The Captain was asleep! I returned and reported the circumstance.

"Then, Bob, why shouldn't we go?"

"Go!" I exclaimed. I could only exclaim, "Go, where?"

"Where? Why home, to be sure, where else?"

I may not be believed, but really the idea of getting away from that golden prison without the aid of one of the men never entered my head.

"How do you intend to escape?" I asked, breathlessly,

for I was greatly excited fearing lest Ronner and his comrades might return and catch us in the act of giving them the slip.

“Bob, a woman’s wit will find out the way. I am surprised at the stupidity of our captors in leaving no one to guard us.”

“There is the venerable leader of the band close at hand,” I reminded her, “and I know he has a pistol ready loaded beside him.”

“I was not aware of that ; we must be cautious. Now fetch me one of the candles and then give me your arm.” Like a well-drilled husband I did as I was bid. “So, now we are all right. You remember coming down the steps on your way here ?”

“Clearly.”

“Then the first thing to be done is of course to find them. Then there are three turnings before we reach the open air. We must be very careful how we go.”

After walking twenty yards we found the stairs and ascended them. When about twelve steps

from the top, just as we were congratulating each other on having out-witted our captors, I heard a half-stifled groan which induced me to look back. It was well I did so, for not five steps behind us what was my horror to see the aged Captain climbing up with great difficulty and in acute pain owing to the operation he had so recently undergone within the last twelve hours. A large pad supported the remaining portion of the arm which I had severed three inches above the elbow. I could scarcely believe my eyes. He held a long-bladed knife shaped like a scimitar in his mouth. Already his arm was extended to seize my wife and hurl her down the steps, reserving the knife as a receipt in full for me.

When he perceived I had discovered him, he gave a yell of mingled rage and disappointment. I told my plucky little heroine to go on and leave me to deal with the avenger.

“Come back,” he shouted as he reached the step immediately

below the one on which I was standing. "Come back, come back, I shall be killed if you are not here when Ronner and the men return."

He made a lunge at me with his knife in desperation. He had of course only his one arm with which to defend himself. I succeeded, after a brief scuffle, in wrenching the knife away from his grasp. We struggled—his strength was marvellous considering his advanced age—he threatened, he begged, he implored us to go back with him. He struck me a heavy blow on the face, which exasperated me beyond all endurance. I thrust him from me, he stumbled, reeled, and fell with a despairing shriek, and then———and then all was still.

* * * * *

Was it murder? I have mourned for that hasty act to this day. I would have saved him, but the blow on the face maddened me for a moment, and in that single moment the mischief was done of which I have

long since bitterly repented. It has been the one big black blot on my whole life. What would I not give to redeem that second?

But there was no time to be wasted, the gang might arrive any second. I ran up the remaining few steps, where, on the topmost, my wife waited for me as pale as death itself. We spoke not, but joining hands, ran along the passage until we emerged once more into the blessed open air. How delicious it seemed after having been underground all those hours! It was like breathing new life.

It was half-past seven o'clock. Being December, daylight had not entirely faded. There was Cape Town lying below us. It appeared quite a Liliputian city from our bird's-eye view of it.

Pausing a few minutes for breath, we again hurried forward. To our terror we saw—not Ben and his associates, but a sight which filled our hearts with almost as much dread. It was the South-easter cloud; the table-cloth was being laid with its usual swift-

ness. We were soon engulfed in its damp folds, and could see but four or five paces in front of us. It was useless trying to find our way, and the cloud might remain there three or four days! We were soon soaked to the skin.

“We must keep moving, Bob, or we shall perish with the cold. There is one comfort in having this cloud.”

“I should very much like to know what that is,” I grumbled.

“There is no chance of those horrid men finding us. I should much prefer meeting death *on* the mountain than in it.”

We wandered on and on, journeying we knew not whither. I might write three or four pages, detailing our peregrinations about the mountain. Suffice it to say that, cold and weary, we were gladdened by the sight of a fire. I was about to hasten forward to its cheerful glow, when I was effectually restrained by my wife observing, “Perhaps it is Ben’s fire.”

We gradually approached it, when to our great joy we discovered a picnic party overtaken like ourselves by the cloud. They were very hospitable. The ladies welcomed my wife with much kindness. We decided not to tell our unknown entertainers whence we came, simply saying we had been separated from our party, as indeed we had!

When the cloud had disappeared, which it did early the next day, we were astonished to find how close we were to Cape Town. We reached our humble home about 7 o'clock in the morning. What did we find there heaped up in the attics like so much rubbish? The reader need not be a conjurer to guess that. We found the sacks of gold which had been carried from the cave as if for our especial benefit.

I was well aware we should never be safe with so much wealth in the house, I therefore dug a deep hole in my garden, in which I deposited our treasure. That is how I spent the

first few hours of my home-coming.

The following day I asked Gordon and three or four old cronies to my house, where my wife and I "fought our battles o'er again." I solicited my friends' advice regarding the vast stock of gold which had found its way to us. They all agreed in saying it would be wiser for both of us to go to England out of harm's way, taking the gold with us, and engaging an agent to sell the ingots, wedges and bars to various goldsmiths and jewellers in London. Gordon was to return to England at the end of the month, and he agreed to go with us.

I sold my house; it was in too isolated a position for us now that we possessed so much wealth. I bought a house in Adderley-street, or, as it was then named, De Heerengracht. There we remained until the ship sailed.

Gold brings its troubles. Since possessing it I had not a peaceful hour. I imagined my house was constantly being

broken into. I engaged two watchmen to guard the house, one by day and the other by night. I expected my troubles would cease when on board ship; not at all, if anything they increased. I became irritable and suspicious of everybody who came near me.

As the ship in which we had embarked set sail after sail going out of Table Bay, I gazed on Table Mountain and mentally registered a solemn vow that no chains ever forged should drag me there again, though a host of protectors accompanied me, I could not find that cavern of gold, even if I had the inclination, to save my life. My wife says she thinks *she* could! Anyhow I shall take care she never has the opportunity.

My narrative is nearly concluded. I sold the gold for its full value in England, and found myself an exceedingly wealthy man when I returned to the Cape. During my absence Dr. Grumble had died. As I had no wish to lead an indolent life

I bought his practice, and for twenty years had my share of hard work.

My accession to prosperity had not the effect of changing my wife's simplicity of heart. She often speaks of the time when the guitar supplied the place of our present handsome piano.

It does not require wealth to promote happiness, else the poor would have but a dreary time of it whilst on earth. We should, I am convinced, have been quite as happy if we had never paid a visit to that subterranean treasure-store.

I still often and often think of my sojourn underground and also of my struggle on the stairs with the Captain, whose name I never heard. Even now I start up sometimes from my sleep as I fancy I hear his last despairing shriek, which haunts me and I expect will continue to haunt me to my last day, which cannot now be far distant.

What became of Ben Ronner and his crew, whether they made their fortunes I cannot

inform you, nor indeed do I greatly care as long as they leave me in possession of that greatest of blessings to old age—PEACE. I shall never interfere with *them*—that is quite certain.

FINIS.