

MY CHIEF AND I.

CHAPTER I.

MY EARLY STORY.

“My Chief and I!”—such is the title which I have chosen to give to my tale, although it is of my Chief principally that I shall speak, reserving to myself the post of chronicler, and speaking of myself only so far as is necessary in describing that part of his life which has been brought into contact with mine. Yet to accomplish this, some slight account of myself must be laid before the public, and with this I will begin before passing on to more interesting subjects.

My name is Atherton Wylde, and I am still a comparatively young man,—young at least in years,

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although perhaps in little else. Fifteen years ago I was a subaltern of engineers, and went out to Gibraltar to serve under him whom I have since learnt to call my Chief, then Captain Durnford, of the Royal Engineers.

Well do I remember him as he was when I, wild in nature as in name, first came under his command. Gallant soldier! kind and courteous gentleman! There was not one amongst us,—officer or man,—who would not have followed him to certain death, or have gladly died in his defence, for we all loved as well as respected him. I might fill many pages with stories which would prove how well he earned our affection, what thoughtful care he exercised over our welfare, how kind, firm, and judicious was his treatment of us, so that never did one of his men fear to go to him for advice or help, nor dare to face him with a guilty conscience. When he took his final leave of them upon the parade-ground at Gibraltar amongst one hundred and twenty stalwart hardy soldiers, all admirably disciplined, fearless men, there was not,—no! I do not think I speak beyond the fact when I

say that there was not a single one whose eyes were dry. I think it no shame to my Chief to acknowledge that upon that day he himself was no stern unmoved exception to the general rule. I parted from him then, and did not think ever to serve under him again. Had not unkind fate removed me from beneath his influence I think that my own story would have been a different and a worthier one ; for my desire to please him, and my dread of his displeasure were so great that, reckless youngster though I was, I never seriously offended while I was with him. From the time that he left us, however, my downward course began. I was an only son, and, much indulged. I had never known what it was to deny myself, or to be denied, in anything. My subsequent course of folly sprung less from vicious inclinations than from a gay and happy temperament, which combined an immense capacity and desire for pleasure, with an absolute lack of self-restraint, either natural or acquired. Thus much I may say in my own excuse, though I fear that it is hardly worth recording.

It is not necessary to enter into a detailed account of the idle, dissipated life into which I plunged as soon as ever my captain's restraining influence was removed. The course, through every phase of folly into the deeper shades of vice, has been too often depicted, and is too well known to many, to need recapitulation here. It is enough for my purpose to state that not many years had passed over my head before I found myself a ruined man, without fortune, career, or friends worthy the name. My father had been both rich and liberal towards me when he first started me in life, and for some time my heavy demands upon his income were met without a murmur. But Fortunatus's purse alone could have held out against my wild extravagance. The day came when I received warnings and remonstrances along with the remittances; and then, a little later on, the latter failed entirely. Finally, I was obliged to leave the army, and returned home a disgraced and ruined man, to my well-nigh heartbroken father.

During the next few idle and miserable months it

seemed to me that I had awakened from an insane dream. All that I might have been, all that I had forfeited by my own folly, rose daily before my mind's eye, contrasted with the degradation to which I had sunk, until I could endure the quiet inactive life that I was leading no longer, and determined to try that last resource for the desperate,—a life in one of the colonies. I think that my relatives, with the exception of my poor father, were glad to get rid of me, and wished above all things that I should hide in a foreign land the disgrace which my misconduct had brought upon the family. Accordingly I was sent out to Natal, where I was to make my own way as well as I could.

I imagined that when I landed in Durban the colony contained no more desperate and reckless man than I. Life, without the respect of those around me, without self-respect,—to the loss of which I had but lately become so keenly alive,—without position, fortune, all that had made it desirable, was worthless to me. I was ripe for any mischief, and in a fair way to end my days at the lowest stage of humanity ;

when, providentially for me, I met once more with my old captain (now lieutenant-colonel), and was saved by him from, and in spite of, myself.

One day early in 1874 I was strolling aimlessly down West Street, Durban, brooding over my gloomy prospects. In my depressed state of mind I had lacked spirit to seek for employment which, naturally enough, had not come out of its way to seek me. I had that day changed my last five-pound note and did not know where to look for another when that should be spent. In fact it was my darkest hour, and rightly so, for it was the hour before dawn to me, the dawn of a better and more useful life than any I had ever led before.

On what small chances our futures seem to hang! Since I had been in Natal I had carefully avoided any meeting with men of my own cloth, not so much from any fear of recognition as from what was, let me hope, a feeling of honest shame and compunction. Accordingly, upon this bright summer morning, I was listlessly watching the stream of people of many nations, English, Dutch, Indians, and Africans, etc., who passed

upon that day, so that the honour of standing by him should not have been left, as indeed it almost was, to the few *black* soldiers of his force alone; yet I did not feel myself worthy of his notice now, and dared not present myself before his gaze in my present degraded situation. Consequently I had given Colonel Durnford no hint of my existence, and now the meeting between us came unsought.

Looking behind me as I walked, I took no heed to my steps until I ran against an advancing figure, and turned to apologise. My apologies were redoubled as I observed the injured arm carried in a sling, and then, one moment later, I knew who it was. Great as was the change wrought by suffering and illness on my former captain's appearance, it was undoubtedly he. Strong and broad was his tall upright figure when I saw him last, one to whom fatigue and illness were almost unknown words. Now he was but the shadow of his former self, and yet there was no mistaking him; I fairly quailed before the searching glance of those steady eyes, and felt as though a frown upon the pale worn face

would annihilate me. I would have left him with the words of apology upon my lips and have escaped—anywhere to be out of his sight. But he was too quick for me, and had recognised me at once.

“What! Wylde? Atherton Wylde? Surely I am not mistaken!” he exclaimed, holding out his hand to me.

I could not choose but take it, although the kindly tones of the well-remembered voice caused me to tremble as I trust no fear could make me do. “Yes, I am Atherton Wylde,” I replied in somewhat unsteady tones. “I hardly thought that you would have recognised me now, Colonel Durnford.”

“I do not forget old friends so easily,” was his reply, while I felt that he was studying my downcast countenance to some purpose, and would fain have hidden it from his view.

“What brings you to Natal, Atherton?” he inquired presently, in rather altered tones; “What are you doing here?” I had been a favourite with

my captain of old, and it seemed to me now that he had not quite lost his interest in me.

“I don't know; nothing,” I faltered in reply. And then, with some gleam of returning spirit, inspired by the very presence of my captain, linked as it was with old associations, “I should be glad enough to get any work to do.”

“Come along and walk back with me to the club,” he said, after a pause, during which I felt as though he was reading my inmost thoughts. “You shall tell me all about it, if you will, and perhaps I may be able to help you.”

I turned, and we walked back almost in silence, during which I came to the determination that I would make a clean breast of it to Colonel Durnford, and abide by his decision. Should he consider my offences unpardonable and spurn me from him, I would give myself up, and make no further effort. Should he hold me out a friendly helping hand,—was there not yet a chance for me?

Never, as long as I live, shall I forget the little back room at the club in which I told, and he listened

to, my tale. Its every detail is riveted in my memory by the powerful emotions which mastered me within its walls: the tap of the billiard-balls in the next room, and the cracked voice of Jelly, the waiter, in the passage, are all present to me while I write these lines. When about half way through my confession I saw a young lady leave the house opposite, at which I was vacantly staring while I spoke, in her broad garden hat and dainty dress. At that moment I was telling my listening colonel how days and nights, and endless sums of money, had been played away by me in the hells of London. Since then broad flapping hats and little dancing steps are inextricably interwoven in my mind with wild wicked scenes and reckless companions.

My Chief,—for such he has been ever since that day,—listened to my story without further interruption than was necessary to the perfect understanding of my case, and with a certain grave intent expression upon his pain-worn countenance which betokened that he was giving his whole attention to the sub-

ject without prejudging its merits. There were some facts to be told in extenuation of my past conduct which I do not care to record here. It is enough that he thought them palliations, if not excuses, and gave me some sympathy as well as blame.

When I had told him all, and sat in breathless miserable silence awaiting his comments upon my tale, he rose and walked away to the window, where he stood apparently contemplating the waste of glaring sand which lies in Smith Street. It could have been but a second that he stood there, yet to me,—poor wretch upon the rack,—it seemed an age. At last he turned, and, venturing to raise my eyes to his, I saw there that I was saved. He came back and sat down again.

“Look here, Wylde,” he said in decided business-like tones, “if you are really willing to *work* and can keep steady, I’ll make a man of you yet. Let by-gones be by-gones, and begin afresh. There must be good in one who can speak the truth so fearlessly as you have done to-day. I know it is the truth, for

I knew all about you before. Will you take a place on the roads?" he asked sharply.

"Certainly, sir," I answered instantly. I thought he meant as a labourer. Had he even offered me the shilling I should not have hesitated to take it.

I think he was pleased with the promptness and earnestness of my reply, for a grave smile crossed his face. "Well, I can put you in charge of a road-party at Pinetown at once," he said. "There are some forty men there, liberated slaves from Zanzibar, whom I wish to keep together. When can you be ready to take them over?"

"At once! to-morrow; as soon as you wish, sir," was my eager reply.

"To-morrow I must go out to Umgeni Bridge, and the next day to the Point," he said, rather to himself than me. "The following day? Yes, I shall leave Durban on Friday, and you can go with me. I shall be driving and can take you in; but you must send your luggage up some other way. Now mind! we shall leave this by half-past six on Friday morning, for I have work to do in Pinetown, and

must get up to Welch's Half-way House the same night, so as to be in Maritzburg in good time on Saturday morning."

When, half-an-hour later, I left the club, and the friend thus suddenly raised up for me in my hour of greatest need, it seemed to me as though I had stepped into a new world. The very sunshine had a more cheerful and less sultry glow; and, for myself, was I the same dejected miserable man who had slouched along the pavement that morning, with but one refuge in view from my gloomy thoughts—the canteen or drinking-bar? I felt no temptation now to turn my steps that way. In fact, drink had never been a passion with me. I had but resorted to it for excitement's sake in the old gay days, and of late to drown my misery. But now the meeting with my former captain, the very fact that, knowing the worst of me, he had yet taken me by the hand, and spoken to me with kindness unmingled with anything like contempt, had helped me back to some self-respect, to some hope for better things. I *would* do better. I resolved it as I had never done before.

I would not disappoint his trust nor cause him to throw away his goodness upon an unworthy object. So resolving I took my way to my lodgings with a firmer step and a higher head than had been mine for many a long day.