

CHAPTER IV.

THE REBELS.

My fatiguing, but not entirely uninteresting, journey came to an end by half-past five, at which hour the 'bus drew up at the Plough Hotel. Here we all alighted; and, glad enough of our release from confinement and each other's very close companionship, we went each our several ways. I must confess that I experienced a slight sensation of relief at seeing my St. Helena *protégée* received and taken away by her own friends; for the thought had crossed my mind more than once how remarkably embarrassing it would be should she prove to have no friends, and should she appeal to me for assistance and protection.

Pietermaritzburg is approached from the Durban side by a wearisome length of flat, dusty, uninteresting

road. The slight undulations over which the way passes for the last fifteen miles strike one as doubly monotonous after the wild and beautiful broken country through which the middle stage is cut. The little city,—extremely pretty at that distance, which lends enchantment to the view,—had seemed close at hand for a long while. Lying in its basin, amongst hills, it showed a picturesque mass of houses and trees, amongst which the tall feathery spires of the blue-gum stood out conspicuous. The white buildings of Fort Napier, rather bare but business-like, rose boldly above the town, the greater part of which it commands, against a background of loftier hills, dim in the gentle haze which prevails through the Natalian winter months, when only foreground objects have a sharp decided outline. But such charms as the scenery possessed had lost their power long before we had passed the last undulation of the road, and drove rapidly down to the Victoria Bridge. Past the Park, we rumbled over the dustiest bit of road that we had yet encountered, running,—melancholy entrance to the capital of a country,—right through the

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public cemetery. On either hand, tombstones, shrubs, and trees were alike whitened and stifled by the heavy dust; and, amidst a cloud of the latter, which rendered us invisible to the passers-by, and them to us, we drove up to the Plough Hotel.

Hiring a native to carry my portmanteau, I walked straight towards Fort Napier, where I knew that the Colonel lived. I was in so dusty a condition that I hardly liked to appear in the streets, which, somehow or other, in spite of the dry, dusty weather, managed to preserve an air of cleanliness and freshness, at least in the less public thoroughfares. Probably, however, this was greatly due to the many trees and running streams of the town. The trees are now fast being cut down and the streams covered over now by the municipal authorities.

However, there was no help for it, as the streets of Pietermaritzburg boast of no public conveyances whatsoever. So, giving myself one good shake, to get rid of what superfluous dust I could,—much as a dog does on coming out of the water,—I started off at a

brisk pace for the Colonel's quarters. His *home* I did not feel that I could call it, for there was nothing homelike about it, save for the two baboons, who had a comfortable establishment of their own in the courtyard, the horses in their good stables, and the dogs and native servants. But for the master himself there was but little attempt at comfort. Strict military order and cleanliness reigned from end to end of the little domain, but nothing more. His sitting-room and dining-room was his office ; his bedroom a narrow slip behind it, or, in fine weather, a tent set up in the garden. The garden itself was of a considerable size, and contained a number of old trees. It was all freshly laid out when I saw it for the first time, for the Colonel had only lately come to live there, and his plants had not yet had time to grow and embellish the place. I wandered about it for some time, more and more depressed by its deserted and melancholy appearance, until at last I came back unconsciously to the garden-gate and halted there. How long I remained thus wrapped in a brown study I know not, but I was roused by a cheerful voice close behind me,

which exclaimed: "What! Atherton Wylde! you moralising over a gate at this time of day!" I turned to find that I had been so absorbed by my own meditations that I had heard nothing of the Colonel's approach on horseback, until he had ridden up so close to me as to overhear some sudden outspoken words which had escaped me.

"We shall have no time for moralising now," said he again, as he sprang from his horse, and gave me his hand with a kind welcome. "Our work is cut out for us for the next few months. Of great importance I think it, for many reasons of which you shall know more shortly."

At his arrival the silent deserted habitation seemed to spring suddenly into life, and to assume an entirely different air. A couple of native men,—servants, clad in suits of spotless white canvas, edged with scarlet, rose as it were from the earth to take his horse and his orders, with a respectful salute of "'Nkos!" (*Anglicè*, "Chief," "Master.") A splendid dog of the kangaroo-hound species had followed in his steps, and now stood watching for the caress which was presently

accorded him, and casting at me an occasional glance of that polite reserve with which a noble dog commonly treats his master's stranger-guests. And, as we went indoors, various other meaner dogs started up on either hand to greet their master, who had a kind word for each, although evidently full of thought and business.

“Now, Wylde,” said he in brisk business-like tones, “I have some despatches here to attend to which will occupy me for half an hour, after which I must ride up the hill to my rebel working-party there. Take something first,” as his servant brought out wine and glasses at a signal from his master, “and then, if you can get rid of the dust and fatigue by the time I start, you may as well take my second horse and ride with me. I will tell you something of my plans on the way.”

By the light of later experience I see now how particularly absurd was the excitement into which I was thrown by the Colonel's speech. But I must candidly own that, utterly forgetting the lesson I had already received that very day upon the force of such

expressions as used in Natal, that one word "rebel" sent the blood flying through my veins, and my thoughts running ahead with all the eagerness natural to a hot and foolish young soldier. I immediately concluded that some body of men working upon the roads had turned insurgents, and that we were to quell them by force of arms. As to asking any questions, I did not dream of such a thing, nor would I allow myself to show the excitement that I felt, the Colonel's own calmness, and quiet unconcerned manner, inspiring me to assume the same.

After the day's heat and dust a bath and a change were most welcome; but I was in too great a hurry to enjoy the relief as thoroughly as I should have done had there been no "rebels" on the hill, in prospect. I had observed that numerous weapons of all descriptions adorned the walls of the outer room, or office, and I came out, when fresh dressed, eager to have some assigned to me, and to see what force was to accompany us. My Chief had just finished his writing, and two horses stood ready saddled at the door. But the warlike preparations,

which I had fondly expected, where were they? The Colonel, truly, was in uniform; but that was nothing unusual, and he bore no visible weapon, nor were there armed retainers of any sort in view. I was puzzled. However I kept my curiosity to myself, and we mounted and rode away.

We proceeded for some little distance in perfect silence. The Colonel's mind was plainly engrossed by whatever he had in hand, while I would not speak upon the subject which occupied my thoughts, and could not speak on any other.

He broke silence first by saying something more of the importance in his opinion of our present enterprise. Whereupon I ventured to inquire whether he intended to enter upon it unsupported. My readers will probably conclude that either I was mad myself, or else that I thought my Chief so; but in fact I had given him an allegiance so complete that I should not have dreamt of questioning the reasonableness of any proposition of his.

“No,” he answered carelessly, “Captain B—— of the 75th, and his company go with me, and

the young Basuto chief, Hlubi, with some fourteen followers, besides the Putini men."

I thought that I now understood the matter, and that we should presently join our force. The Colonel probably carried a revolver, and did not wear a sword because it would be worse than useless to him on horseback with his injured left arm. And as for me, I supposed that it had escaped his notice that I was unarmed. I must therefore make shift to snatch some weapon from the enemy, and if I fell in the attempt,—well, one could only die once. Nursing these heroic resolves I rode on while the Colonel resumed his discourse. "We shall give confidence to the people of Weenen county, who are certainly in a horrid fright," said he. "Poor things! As Dr. Livingstone says of the Dutch Boers, they are very brave when Kaffirs have no guns. You see we shall penetrate into odd holes and corners of the country. The natives of Zikali's and Somadula's tribes will see the 'Ama-soldiers' for the first time, and the result will, on the whole, I expect, be good."

I was more mystified than ever, for, having once

lost the right clue, I was getting farther and farther away from the truth at every word; and, as there were limits to even my dutiful want of curiosity, I tried to make a dash out of the fanciful labyrinth in which I had involved myself, by asking where we should get to that night.

It was now the Colonel's turn to look astonished. "To-night!" he exclaimed, "back to my quarters, I hope."

"I give it up," murmured I to myself, while he continued.

"Did you imagine that we were making a start in this style? I cannot get off for another day or two yet. Ah! here are my rebels."

I looked up eagerly as we rode round a sharp turn in the road which concealed the next two hundred yards from our view, and made ready for the dash with which I was to secure my weapon, when——! But blank surprise and disappointment fell upon me as the "rebels" came in sight. About a hundred men were drawn up at the side of the road under a corporal and four privates of infantry with

some military precision, although they were truly a ragged regiment ; but all bore picks and shovels ready for their legitimate work, and saluted my Chief with the utmost respect and submission.

“The outbreak seems thoroughly quelled, sir,” remarked I rather awkwardly.

“There never was any,” was his startling reply as he put his horse into a canter, and rode up to the party. Plainly we were still at cross purposes, and he imagined my remark to apply to the late “rebellion” of the whole two tribes. And now, having inspected the men, and given some directions to the corporal in charge, he turned his horse’s head homeward again, and we retraced our steps.

By this time the sun was sinking ; but, as it vanished, the colder light of the moon high in the heavens made all around almost as distinct as by day. As we rode back my curiosity finally got the better of me, and I could not help saying to the Colonel, “Excuse me for asking, sir, but why do you call these poor creatures ‘rebels?’ What have they done?”

“What have they done? Nothing, I believe from my soul,” was the reply. “I call them rebels in derision of those who are afraid of them. They are prisoners of the Putini tribe, which was ‘eaten up,’ as they call it themselves, on a charge of complicity with Langalibalele. They were given over to me at my urgent request to work upon the roads. The whole thing, as far as they are concerned, is now allowed to have been a mistake, and their freedom, and that of their tribe, is one of the chief objects that I have in view in our expedition up-country. The poor creatures have been as good and quiet as possible, and work well. I am endeavouring to persuade Government to promise them their freedom on their return from the Draakensberg mountains, where we are about to destroy the passes, supposing that they do their duty well, of which I am well assured. And I hope the release of the whole tribe may follow. You understand, of course, Wylde, that these things must not be spoken of. I have confidence in you, and trust you to keep counsel well; but discretion is most important now. A word from you, were

you to get talking amongst your friends, might do much mischief and perhaps upset my plans."

I hastened to assure him that I should look upon any confidence which he might be good enough to repose in me as a trust, to violate which would be most dishonourable ; and I remarked besides that, even if I were inclined to be indiscreet, I should have no temptation in that line at present, as I did not know a single soul in the place, except himself alone.

In return I learnt from him much which I can safely say never passed my lips nor left my pen until long after the plans of which he told me had been either carried out or abandoned.

"The main object of this expedition upon which we are going," said he, apparently satisfied with my assurances, "is to restore confidence to Weenen county, which is shaken to its foundations by fears of an attack from the young men of the Hlubi tribe, who are reported to be collecting on the borders under the command of my friend Mabudhle, one of

Langalibalele's chief captains, with whom I have already exchanged 'love-tokens' (with a glance at his wounded and still useless left arm). There are also supposed to be parties of marauders lurking in the county. One or two houses have already been attacked, two persons stabbed, and an attempt made to treat the resident magistrate in the same way. I rather imagine that these are individual acts of personal vengeance, committed perhaps by men whose women and children were killed during the expedition last year, and that they must not be considered as systematic attacks upon the white population. Nevertheless, the state of panic to which they have given rise must be checked at once. It is also desirable to destroy the passes in the Draakensberg, bordering Weenen county, of which I believe there are many, although upon that point I can obtain but little information from those who have long lived in the colony, and who certainly ought to know. These passes once destroyed it will for some years be impossible for horsemen to enter Natal on this side, or for cattle to be carried off over the

range. I intend to take this party of so-called 'rebels' with me to act as pioneers, in which capacity I have no doubt but that they will render valuable service, and thus enable me to claim from Government the pardon of the whole tribe, and their restoration to their old location. Government, I think, must by now be fully aware of the mistake that has been committed in 'eating up' this innocent tribe; and the good services of my hundred pioneers, in closing the passes adjoining their own location, will afford a fair excuse for setting the whole tribe free, and for making restitution so far as may be possible. By this means the colonial authorities will extricate themselves from the very unpleasant dilemma in which they now find themselves placed, as I am convinced that the Imperial Government will never sanction such gross injustice as has been perpetrated, and it is necessary that the matter should be promptly taken in hand."

Such was the substance of my Chief's discourse, to which I listened in attentive silence, feeling excessively anxious to get hold of matters by the right end

at once, and knowing that such opportunities as this might not often fall in my way.

It struck me then, as it has often struck me since, for how very little he himself went in his own estimation of whatever work he had in hand. The liberty of these unfortunates, the peace of the country, the calming of fears for which he certainly had a lively contempt, were all objects for his utmost exertions. So also even was the honour of the colonial government, the late actions of which I rather fancy went shares with the aforesaid "fears" in this respect, although while under it he served it as truly and energetically as he has all his life served that Imperial Government which has always owned his highest allegiance.

With these objects in view, he formed, and he carried out, an enterprise involving the severest hardships to himself at a time when he had not sufficiently recovered from wounds and consequent illness to endure them with impunity. Yet, never then nor since, have I heard him claim the slightest credit to himself in the matter. To the outside world he held himself as the servant of the Government, obeying its

orders, and carrying out its plans,—plans which he alone had made, and to permit the accomplishment of which he had with the greatest difficulty to persuade an undecided governor, and the crafty unscrupulous men who governed him. Later on,—as I saw with my own eyes,—he had also to force the same rulers to keep the promises which they had made to the Putini tribe, and which they would have broken had not my Chief's stern uncompromising sense of honour kept them, with the greatest difficulty, to the mark. But of this more hereafter.

I dined that evening with the Colonel, his fine dog "Prince" sharing the banquet with us, evidently quite as a matter of course. His behaviour was most irreproachable and gentlemanlike. He sat at his master's side; his tall graceful head above the level of the table, and his beautiful eyes gravely surveying the dishes. He patiently awaited his share of each. If he thought himself forgotten he made no sound nor disturbance of any kind, but raised one great paw, and laid it gently upon the Colonel's arm in mute entreaty which could not be resisted. His master told me that

“Prince” was his constant and only companion, and evidently thought a good deal of him, while “Prince” as plainly returned the compliment.

I slept that night in a second tent pitched in the garden, which, as the weather was not yet chilly, I found extremely pleasant. It was the first time for some years that I had slept under canvas, but it was not to be the last; and during the next few months I had ample opportunities of comparing such comfortable “camping out” as my Chief’s thoughtful kindness and hospitality afforded me at Fort Napier with the bitter cold of lying under canvas on the Draakensberg in winter-time.