

## CHAPTER XIII.

### BUSHMEN'S CAVES.

THE change in temperature from the mountain-heights to the valley beneath was wonderful, and the following day was sunny, which made us all alive again. Yet the night had been cold enough to freeze a can of water standing in the Colonel's tent.

Our camp next morning presented a more cheerful scene than the one which we had left behind us in the snow. It was a lovely day, with a bright sun shining from a clear blue sky. The Berg was clad in white right down to the valley, and the passes were so completely blocked that we were forced to wait for a thaw before we could commence our labours. Meanwhile all hands were at work erecting shelter by the orders of our Chief, who himself sat writing

despatches in the midst of a busy scene. The tents were all down, in order that the ground might dry in the hot sun. Some of the men were cutting timber, some carrying it, and others putting up screens for tents and fires. One party groomed the horses, while another prepared a train of oxen for a foraging-party. The latter were to bring in loads of pumpkins, mealies, and Kaffir corn from the deserted gardens of which the valley was full, as it formed part of the location from which Langalibalele and his tribe had lately been driven out. The troops, meanwhile, were engaged in cleaning their rifles, etc., their Captain in reading a newspaper, and our Colonel, as mentioned before, in writing, all under an Italian sky and a brilliant sun. In his capacity of Colonial Engineer, the Colonel had continually to answer letters and to send written directions to every part of the Colony, and he always kept a post running to Estcourt from wherever we might happen to be camped at the time.

Not twenty yards from our camp flowed the Bushman's River, a rapid stream of clear water,

which would be charming for bathing in summer-time, but was quite too cold to be pleasant while we were there, although some of us made constant use of it.

That afternoon we explored the Bushmen's caves, —huge caverns rather,—situated in the precipices which tower above the Bushman's River, and in which our pioneers had found temporary shelter. They had made themselves very comfortable, having built screen-walls of stones across the entrances to the caves, to be a shelter from the cold winds. They had also constructed their bed-places in the various recesses and ramifications within, while the mouth of the cave formed a general dining-place, in which, while we were camped here, huge fires were kept burning by those whose duty it was to prepare the food for the whole party.

These caves are full of coloured drawings by the bushmen, hideous representations of eland-hunts, cattle raids, or fights with Kaffirs, whose figures are distinguished by being painted much larger and of a lighter colour than those intended for their small

opponents. Some of the drawings are very clear and distinct, the colouring as brilliant as though just put on; others are less so; but each one is more ugly than its neighbour. We found also in the caves a good many poisoned arrows left by these Bushmen. They were very small, looking more like toys than weapons of war, but were doubtless deadly enough, with their venomed tips, and shafts of mountain reeds.

But there were other caves not very far from this valley which had a later and a deeper interest than any connected with the Bushmen. Here was the scene of one of those tragedies with which, alas! the history of Natal for the year 1873-74 abounds; for here certain fugitives of the Hlubi tribe had been smoked to death by a party of loyal natives under the command of a white man. The caves are situated in a tributary valley to the great Bushman's River Valley, and are formed by masses of rock, resting one against the other, and having three openings or entrances. The story, as far as I could gather, is as follows: A party of "loyal" natives, while patrolling

the valley after the main disturbances were over and the troops had returned to head-quarters, observed a track leading up from the stream to some fissures in the rocks. Following up this track, and seeing evident signs of occupation about the rocks, they called upon the fugitives to come out and surrender themselves, informing them at the same time that their chief Langalibalele had been captured, and was in prison.

There were women and children in the cave as well as men, and, after some parley, the former are said to have come out and to have been taken prisoners. But the men refused, saying that, if their chief was a captive, he was indeed a dead man and they themselves would die where they were. And, perhaps, they had no great belief that their lives would be spared, even although they should give themselves up, knowing that prisoners had frequently been put to death, and sometimes even tortured in a most cruel manner, by the native forces,—possibly being also aware that the presence of white men had sometimes been no safeguard against such cruelties.

However this might be, whether it was devotion to their chief, whom they did not care to outlive, or whether, despairing of life at the hands of the enemy, they preferred to die fighting, the men refused to surrender. No further attempt was made by the attacking force to get them out. But, they piled heaps of brushwood against the apertures of the cave, and set fire to it. Then they sat down to wait until their victims should be smothered by the smoke, or burnt to death should they attempt to force a passage out. This too, reader, was done under the orders of a white leader,—though not one, thank Heaven! in H.M.'s Service,—the only crime of the victims being that of having run away and hidden themselves in fear of death! It appears that one or two of them escaped after the fires were lit, passing along a narrow rift between two huge rocks, the mouth of which was concealed by underwood from the observation of the besiegers. Seven are supposed to have perished; but, if there really were so many, the remains of some of them must have been removed, as, although we made a searching examination of the whole place, we

could only find the skeletons of two. After the lapse of so many months that fact, however, is hardly a proof that more men were not killed at the time.

That the caves,—if such they can be rightly called,—had been well supplied with food was evident from numerous bones of goats, remains of mealies and Kaffir corn, etc., which lay about on every side. Comfortable bed-places, too, had been constructed in various recesses, and a tiny rill of pure water ran through the rocks within the caves. On the ground outside, and near the entrance, could still be seen the remains of the bivouacs of the attacking force which had camped there for one night. One almost regrets that the besieged did not surprise the “Government devils,”—black and white,—asleep, and put an end to the lot, only that such an attack, however much in self-defence, would have been another crime to be charged against the unlucky tribe.

In connection with this story I may as well mention here a little judicial circumstance which came to my knowledge while in Natal, and which perhaps

some of my readers, learned in the law, may be better able to understand than I, a plain soldier, can be expected to do. It appears that during the "Rebellion" of 1873 a party of men on the Government side were attacking some fugitives at bay amongst the rocks. Two of the latter had guns, and used them in defence of themselves and the women and children who were with them, one of them killing his man (a "loyal native"). Finally the fugitives were captured, and carried off to Pietermaritzburg. At the famous "trial" which took place there, they told, of their own accord, exactly what had taken place, without which free confession, by-the-way, no one would have known that they were the two who had held firearms. The sentence upon the party was as follows:—Those who had no guns, and therefore did not fire, received imprisonment with hard labour; the man who fired and missed was condemned to seven years; and *Sibanyana*, the man who hit one of the attacking party, to twenty years' imprisonment with hard labour!

But this is a digression from which we will return to the Bushmen's caves, in order to mention a



native snuff-box and assegai-head, differing from the poisoned arrows described before, and a kind of needle used by the Kaffirs to pick thorns out of their feet, which we found and carried away as relics of the place.

The Colonel sent a patrol up the mountain during the day to ascertain the actual depth of the snow, and, if possible, to bring away the Basutos' and pioneers' tents left behind in their hurried retreat from the weather. On reaching the spot where our camp had stood the men beheld eight elands busily engaged in discussing our stock of pumpkins and mealies, which were buried in the snow, but which their sagacity had discovered, while hunger had so far overcome their natural timidity that the traces of the recent presence of man had not been sufficient to scare them away. Of course they fled at the approach of the patrol, and, though the corporal in charge of the party had several shots at them before they got out of range, he failed to bring any down, for his fingers were so numbed by the cold that he could hardly handle his rifle.



CAMP AT BUSHMAN'S RIVER PASS.

Meanwhile all hands were turned out on a general camp-fatigue. The Colonel had decided that, owing to the season of the year, it would be safer for us to camp in the valley than higher up, in a position from which we might at any time be driven by another fall of snow, and where we might even find ourselves snowed up altogether. Accordingly, he set us all to work, and we finally made ourselves very comfortable, considering our materials and the capabilities of the locality.

The head-quarters' tents were pitched between the Bushman's River, which flowed, close by, over a rocky or pebbly bed, and an enormous cubical mass of rock, about thirty feet of a side, which stood alone at this point in the valley; while the troops' tents were placed at some little distance, on the right bank of a tributary stream to the Bushman's River, all being sheltered by strong fences of sugar-bush, quantities of which grew close by. The fires for cooking purposes were built against the aforementioned mass of rock, and were also sheltered by thick bush-screens; whilst a rude shanty

was put up, made of poles and brushwood, with window, shutters, and door of basket-work, and a roof thatched with grass. This shanty was our dining and sitting room henceforward, and possessed one important advantage, of the ingenuity of which we were very proud. It boasted of a noble chimney, which our Chief himself designed of oxhide stretched while green upon a frame of timber, something after the fashion of the chimney of a blacksmith's forge. Fixed chairs, couch, and table of rustic workmanship completed our dining-hall, which we regarded as an immense success, and which was a palace to us, although in reality but a mere shed.

A guard-hut and powder-magazine, of brushwood also, were constructed in front of the troops' lines, the latter containing our store of powder, which was thus placed under the immediate eye of the sentry. An oven was next built near the troops' kitchen, from which our soldier-baker turned us out most excellent bread; whilst the blacksmith's forge, in constant requisition for sharpening and repairing the pioneers' tools, was placed in a convenient posi-

tion hard by. Our horses had no stables, indeed, and lived in the open ; but we put up rough timber horse-lines, to which they were taken twice a day to be groomed and fed with mealies, and they were allowed to graze at will upon the mountain-slopes. Finally we threw a substantial bridge across the tributary to the Bushman's River, immediately in front of our camp, as it ran right between us and our work, besides separating us from the pioneers lodged in the caves.

The Basuto camp, upon rather higher ground at a distance of some hundred yards to the rear, completed our establishment. Thanks to the forethought and ingenuity with which the work was directed, and the alacrity and attention with which it was carried out, it was as comfortable a bivouac as we could have contrived under the circumstances.

These more permanent arrangements for our comfort and safety were the more necessary, as, in addition to the increasing severity of the season, the works upon which we were now about to commence operations were by far the most extensive that we had

yet undertaken, and would detain us at our present camp for some weeks, whereas none of the other passes had occupied us for more than a few days each. Our present party of pioneers were at work upon the Bushman's River Pass itself, and other smaller ones close by, from July 6th to July 28th, while the working-party, who then relieved them, did not finally quit the place until September 25th.

On the return of the patrol with the tents, the corporal in charge reported that although they had with great difficulty succeeded in forcing their way as far as our old camp-ground, yet that it was impossible to get higher up the mountain. "Impossible" was a word which we were hardly allowed to admit into our dictionaries during this expedition; and the Colonel determined to go and see for himself what the state of things might be. Accordingly, next day, taking with him his more immediate followers and attendants,—his faithful henchman Campbell, the trusty Basutos, and myself,—he started up the mountain. I am sure that throughout this expedition (I might say with equal truth throughout his

life in Natal) my Chief was pitiless to himself, forcing himself to exertions and to an endurance for which he was physically unfit, and which he himself would never have imposed upon any but strong healthy men. He had never spared himself, nor taken a week's rest since he received his wound and other severe injuries eight months before; nor can it be imagined that, with that still open wound and weakened frame, he could have gone through the severe exertions and hardships which I am now recounting, without suffering seriously in consequence, —perhaps for the remainder of his life, certainly for many years.

Upon this occasion we found it comparatively easy work getting as far as the old camp, where much of the snow had melted; but beyond that point it was still very deep, and it took much time and trouble for us to reach the site of my Colonel's camp when on patrol in 1873, after the affair of the 4th November. Here he pointed out to me the long line of the strong sod-wall which had been thrown up to protect from the violent winds the patrol-tents of the small force

encamped for some time upon this bleak ill-omened spot. I saw also some small musketry parapets constructed for outlying pickets in situations commanding access to the pass. All showed that, however futile and needless was the errand upon which my Chief was sent by those in command, he had done his duty as a soldier. The arrangements still existing made it plain enough that no point for defence or attack had been overlooked by him.

We halted here for a little while to recruit ourselves after our exertions in struggling through the deep snow, and then advanced along the side of a steep incline, testing each step with our long Kaffir-sticks. It was indeed a service of some difficulty and danger, as in many places the snow was waist-deep, and a false step would have precipitated one into the rocky river-bed beneath.

We got as far as where the Bushman's River crossed our path as a tiny stream, springing from near the mountain-crest, and then the Colonel, having decided that, with the aid of the pioneers, the pass was practicable, we retraced our steps, and after a



toilsome return journey were glad enough to find ourselves once more beside a blazing fire, at our camp in the more sheltered valley, some five miles down.