

CHAPTER XVII.

ESCAPES AND DISASTERS.

AFTER handing over my men to the magistrate according to my orders, I went on to our camp at the Bushman's River Pass, with despatches for Captain —— from the Colonel. I found all well in camp, and the work upon the mountains progressing satisfactorily, but still a long way from its completion. The Colonel had desired me to return to him in a fortnight's time, with full information about what was being done, and what had yet to be done. Accordingly I spent much of my time in going backwards and forwards to the different spots at which separate parties of men were at work, at distances of three, four, and in one instance of ten miles along the top of the berg. Here there was fair riding-ground, after the first long steep pull from the Bushman's River

Pass;—that is to say, one could ride at the rate of six miles an hour.

Of these passes the one at the greatest distance from our camp, and indeed not three miles from the Giant's Castle, had been newly discovered by the Basuto Windvogel, and a party of some half-dozen soldiers were encamped near at hand for the purpose of scarping it, as it was too far for them to come and go daily from the main camp. My horse having fallen slightly lame one day, I started for this pass on foot, and reached the place so late that I determined to remain with the men for the night and return upon the following morning. Indeed by this time I had become so thoroughly inured to our rough life that it mattered little to me whether I slept in a patrol-tent or marquee, in a sheltered cleft among the rocks or in a Kaffir hut, as long as I could go from a good fire to a thick blanket or rug. The little patrol-tents occupied by the party at this new pass were pitched close under the mountain-crest, where the projecting cliffs afforded some shelter from the piercing blasts.

After sleeping soundly in one of these through the night, I woke about sunrise, dreaming that I was a small boy again, visiting the monkey's cage at the Zoo. It was a vivid dream, for, even after I opened my eyes, the noise made by the animals still sounded in my ears. Oddly enough, it grew louder and louder, until the air was filled with chattering, screaming, and hoarse angry sounds. This could be no dream, and, peeping out through the slit at the end of the tent, I beheld the most remarkable sight my eyes ever fell upon. The patrol-tents, as I have said, were close beneath the cliff; and surrounding them, in the form of a crescent or half-moon, hundreds of dog-faced baboons had collected in hostile array, apparently exceedingly angry to find strange creatures upon the mountains which they had hitherto regarded as their own. These animals exist in great numbers upon the Draakensberg, and are very large and excessively fierce. I have heard that they will attack the leopard, or tiger as it is called in Natal, whenever they see him, regardless of the numbers they may lose in the contest. There seems to be a blood-feud between

them, and it is said that, if once tracked by the baboons, a tiger never escapes them in the end.

It may easily, therefore, be conceived that they would prove formidable antagonists to the six or seven men whom they now appeared disposed to attack. Our rifles would have been of little service to us, for we should only have time to fire once ere we should be seized and torn in pieces by the disgusting monsters,—than which I can hardly imagine a more revolting fate.

The baboons formed an army, in fact, for they were led by an old male of great size and grizzled with age. He was so evidently in command of the party that he was immediately dubbed “the general” by us. While we were all peeping out and watching the angry gestures of the animals with some anxiety, one of the men said that he had heard that, although enraged baboons were not to be scared away by the loss of any number of what might be called their rank and file, yet that the death of their leader was always the signal for instant flight. This, we thought, might possibly be the case, and, at all events, the move-

ments of the enemy now became so aggressive that we decided to try the plan as our only chance of escape. The men seized their rifles, and one of them covering "the general," fired and killed him upon the spot. To our intense relief and satisfaction, his followers immediately turned and fled upon seeing him fall, and vanished over the mountain, their howls and screams echoing amongst the rocks long after they had passed from our sight.

I am no coward, I hope, but I confess I felt for the moment almost overcome by the thought of our certain fate had the mass of enraged brutes persisted in their attack.

After a breakfast of hot coffee and biscuit, which was most acceptable in the keen mountain air, I thought I would find my way back to the camp down the pass in which the men were engaged, instead of along the mountain-top, over which I had walked or ridden so often that I was quite tired of it. Accordingly, accompanied by the trusty Windvogel, who had come with me as guide, I started down the mountain. We had a terrific scramble for part of the way, down

along the bed of a dried-up watercourse ; but I had become accustomed to that sort of descent, and looked upon it as a matter of course.

After a long and toilsome walk we at last approached the camp, which lay round a sharp corner or shoulder of hill, so that it was not visible to us until we were close upon it. As we came in full view of it, but at a considerably higher elevation, from which we looked down upon it, I saw, to my great consternation, the guard-hut suddenly burst into a blaze. The guard and a few soldiers left in camp immediately rushed to the powder-magazine, and carried the powder-barrels to the river-side, so that they could be thrown in should the fire spread in that direction, and then all set to work to strike the tents as rapidly as possible. Fortunately, the grass had been carefully cut for a considerable distance round each tent ; but the wind, blowing strongly at the time, carried the flame from the guard-hut right across the tributary stream to the Bushman's River, and in one moment the whole hill-side was in a blaze. The long grass and bush at this time of year was as dry as tinder, so that when it

once caught fire nothing could stop its burning. The flame ran up the hill, and coming to the mouth of a deep ravine, turned, and, sweeping again across the stream, seized upon the hill-side above the camp. Soon the whole valley, as far as the eye could reach, was a raging sea of flame,—a grand sight truly, but an awful one to witness.

Thanks to the precautions taken for the protection of our camp from fires, in the broad belts of closely-cut grass which surrounded us on every side, no damage was done either to life or property, except the destruction of the guard-hut where the mischief began. But for some time we were in considerable danger, as at any moment a stronger gust of wind might drive the flame across our safeguards. In the course of one half-hour our pleasant grassy valley, with its numerous evergreen bushes, was reduced to a cinder, presenting nothing to the sight but a blackened surface, dotted with charred and smouldering stumps.

Had Windvogel and I been but a little later in our return to camp we should assuredly have been overtaken and destroyed by the flames, for the spot upon

which our camp remained, looked afterwards like an oasis in a desert of black, which surrounded it on every side. As it was, we had barely time to gain our lines before the hill we had just quitted was one sheet of flame.

So for a second time in the course of a few hours my Basuto friend and I were preserved from a dreadful death,—first, by the hands and teeth of the infuriated baboons; and, secondly, by the breath of that element, so useful when restrained, so incomparably terrible and deadly when once set free.

Our party met with another accident a few days later, which unfortunately proved less harmless than that already related, although it directly affected two only of our company.

One morning I was, with a working-party, employed in blasting, when an explosion made some of us turn to find that two soldiers who were engaged in boring a hole in the rock had been blown to a little distance from it, and were lying on the ground with injured eyes and faces. The hole had been charged upon the previous day, but had missed fire, and the

men, under the impression that it had been "drowned," had set to work at it again. The powder, however, was dry and fit for use, and hence arose the accident. It was one of those pieces of carelessness which men so often commit when they have been long enough employed upon perilous materials for their sense of danger to become blunted by custom.

The poor fellows were immediately conveyed to the camp; we sent off a mounted orderly to Estcourt for a doctor; and meanwhile did what little we could to make the sufferers comfortable. The doctor arrived next day, and, after making his examination, he pronounced that the sight of the man who was most seriously hurt would not be permanently injured, although it would be a long while before he recovered the use of it. His comrade was simply burnt, and was doing well. We sent the former down to headquarters at Pietermaritzburg as soon as he was fit to travel, and I am happy to say that when I saw him last he was perfectly recovered from the accident.

I will close this chapter of escapes and disasters with an account of a curious accident which occurred

to an attendant of some English visitors to our camp, who were upon a shooting expedition amongst the mountain-spurs, and came to us for a night's lodging. They had been out after elands, which, however, they had not found, and had been benighted, and obliged to lie out the night before they came to us. The accident to their servant occurred as follows. He happened to be a "head-ring man," which, as it turned out, was a fortunate circumstance for him. In the darkness of the night he had walked clean over a precipice, some thirty feet high, falling upon his head-ring, the interposition of which saved his skull, which was not cracked, as it must have been had it been unprotected. The ring itself was not broken, although the hair was almost torn out by the roots, and the head much cut. Yet, when his injuries were dressed at our camp, the man obstinately refused to part with the cherished ornament, which was only attached by some half-dozen hairs. Wrapping a handkerchief round it, he appeared to be far more concerned for his head-ring than for his head.