

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

**T**HE clear sun of an African morning in November shone upon Ladysmith. Watching upon the surrounding hills lay the Boer army, and the still air reverberated to the boom of guns.

"I had never thought," said Lord Woden, "to put on a uniform again at my age."

"You look fine in it," said his companion. "Biggest man in the Natal Carabineers."

"And the oldest," added John.

He thought of Gettysburg long ago, when as a young man he had worn Confederate grey. Why, that was thirty-six years ago! Now he was a Natal Carabineer. South Africa wanted soldiers in 1899 and she wanted them badly; when John had offered his six feet three of manhood and his military age of forty-nine to the recruiting officer, that gentleman had smiled and made no comment. He knew Lord Woden and he knew his age; John was too prominent to have much about him that was in doubt. However, they were not regulars, and so he enlisted, "John Woden, aged forty-nine," which sounded so much younger than fifty.

"Stronger than many men half your years, my lord."

"I am Private John Woden here, my dear fellow, and I thank you for your compliment. There *is* life in the old dog yet."

John smoked his eternal cigarettes, which would be valuable enough before the siege was raised.

"I have a grandson with the Scaforths—a fine lad. He was gazetted to them practically straight from Harrow."

"You a grandfather? You don't look it. Yes, the British War Office have a move on now. No time to waste keeping likely fellows on the parade ground."

John bit into his cigarette until he ruined it and threw it away in disgust. He was tremendously proud of young Tim, second-lieutenant of the Seaforth Highlanders, but—there was Harry, his son! A dark rumour had reached John that he had joined the Johannesburg Police, and was fighting with the enemy.

His son—fighting with the enemy!

"The dirty traitor," thought John.

Technically he was not, being by law an American citizen, and entitled to offer his services where he willed. Morally, was another matter.

John pulled out another cigarette, and started to smoke furiously.

"Careful with those cigarettes, old man. Heaven knows when we can get any more."

"Sorry. Plenty more yet. Have one?—I was just thinking——"

"Looking like a thunder-cloud, too," remarked the other. "Thinking of the boy? He'll be safe enough, and you wouldn't have him stay at home singing 'Good-bye, Dolly Gray'?"

"No, that I certainly shouldn't. I was thinking of—someone else.—Situation generally doesn't look too healthy, does it?"

"No, it's the confounded War Office. We're never ready. But we shall pull through yet."

The situation generally certainly did not look too healthy. There seemed nothing to prevent the Boers from advancing their troops to the sea. It was a desperate race for time; at full speed a long line of transports were tearing south to the Cape. Hour after hour brought them nearer: the destiny of British South Africa depended upon the engine-rooms of the transports.

On the evening of November 9th, 1899, the signal station at Table Mountain saw the smoke of the *Roslin Castle* coming past Robben Island, carrying the first of the reinforcements, full speed for Durban. Within a week the great harbour, the pride of Natal, was crowded with a fleet of liners and thousands of men were disembarking and being rushed up to join Buller.

Ladysmith waited and held fast. \*

It was ten o'clock at night on December 8th, when a small band of men, about six hundred strong, left the beleaguered town for the hills. They were under no orders except to obey them; they had no idea of where they were going, and John was amongst them.

At last before them loomed a great hill. Higher and higher crept the contingent. . . . A crackle of fire broke out in front of them. "Come on, boys." They rushed forward to the great gun. . . .

Men with slouch hats were coming out of the dark. One of them came at John, firing and firing again. He came nearer and nearer, until his features could be discerned in the faint moonlight.

"Harry!"

"Father! My God, it's father!"

"You damned traitor!" said John, and pressed the trigger of his rifle—

"Harry!" The still figure never moved.

"I have killed him. I have killed my son, and—I think I am glad of it. He was a damned traitor, anyway—my son."

The British forces were being called off now. Back to Ladysmith in triumph! They had silenced the big gun. Only one man wounded, and very cheap at the price!

"You look rather done up. Woden. Better take a rest."

For John was thinking of the still thing on Gun Hill which had been his son.

"I did my duty," he thought, but his heart was heavy within him.

He recollected Lucy then, and how she had spoken of that other Harry, after whom his boy had been named—he who had fallen "way down at Bull Run." It came to him curiously that that Harry also had been within the ranks of his then enemies. . . .

"It is an unlucky name . . ."

There was a loud whistle in the morning air.

"Lie flat!"

A vivid flash, and John felt himself hurled into darkness. . . . He came to himself with the reek of chloroform in his nostrils and a dull pain in his side. As he entered again into the world of sensibility, he heard a voice speaking.

"She was all in white and she carried a candle."

But when he opened his eyes, there was no one to be seen but the doctor and a kindly faced nurse.

"Who was it with the candle?" he whispered.

"Nothing, old chap. You've been dreaming. Go to sleep, and you'll soon be all right."

He was very tired, so he went to sleep once more. Then, there were dreams—such odd dreams. All about Angelina and the pool at Redehall amidst the summer greenery: about Lucy and the little lights in the Pennsylvanian wood—about an odd, queer girl with a candle—

And while he lay in bed there came the blood and fire of Magersfontein, and a few days later it was broken to him, ever so gently, that amongst the slain in that disastrous action was one Second-Lieutenant Woden, of the Seaforth Highlanders. For they had known that he was in the town, and an important person, and had "helioid" the news from Buller's lines.

"They might have spared me that," said John, quietly, and turned his face to the wall, but did not die.