

# "Love in the Wilds"

—OR—  
The Romance of a South African Trading Station.

CHAPTER XIX.  
ON THE TRAIL OF THE ANTELOPE

Laurence ate in silence, Cecil occasionally lifting his dark eyes, with a half-questioning, half-dreamy gaze, to the handsome, tanned face of his companion.

When dinner was finished Laurence washed the plates—it was not all romance—and put them away; then, lighting his pipe at the embers of the dying fire, sung himself at full length upon the bed of flowers outside the hut.

Cecil dragged the log of wood to the door and, sitting so he could lean back against the hut, watched the wreaths of smoke curling from the fragrant pipe.

A few feet from them the horses were cropping the sweet grass in the shade of the trees.

"Laury," said Cecil, suddenly, "you should always smoke. You look happier with a pipe in your mouth. Why, I wonder?"

Laurence turned and laid his head upon his elbow.

"You are a queer boy, Cecil," he said, with a grave smile. "Why do you watch my face so closely?"

Cecil looked on the ground.

"I don't watch your face Laury," he said. "At least—well, I can't help seeing it if it's right before me, you know. Besides, a cat may look at a king; and you're not a king, you know."

The cattle-runner nodded.

"No," he said. "But I am as free—as yet," he added, suddenly, and with a fringe shadow darkening his brow.

The youth noticed the addendum, but had learned enough of Laury's nature to know that if he wanted to know anything respecting his affairs the way not to learn was to ask point-blank.

So, though he longed to ask him what he meant, he beat round the bush like a woman.

"You seem to value your liberty at a very high price, Laury," he said, putting his hands behind his head and swinging back so that he might fix his eyes upon the thoughtful face in a comfortable attitude.

Laurence nodded.

"Ay," he said, curtly; "at a higher price than you can guess, lad. I lost more than gold for this life of liberty and solitude."

And he swept his hand, with a quiet grace, toward the prairie.

Cecil's brows knit.

"One would think you had been a

slave to hear you talk," he said. "A slave, like Trottie and Mat, and the rest of them at the station."

Laurence frowned.

"Ah, Cecil," he said, with a solemn sadness; "I was near being worse than those poor creatures. They were slaves against their will; I was almost consenting to slavery, and worse."

Cecil looked puzzled.

"And you ran away?" he asked.

"Poor Laury!"

"Ay, poor Laury, indeed!" he replied, rising as he spoke, with a strange laugh. "Run away and left the dearest old home man ever had, ever knew; left kith and kin and all one's friends for freedom, Cecil, my boy—for freedom!"

The youth watched him as he shook himself like a huge dog and called to his horse.

"And yet," he said, not moving from his indolent, easy position, "you are nearly losing it again!"

Laurence turned sharply.

"Who says that?" he asked.

"You did—yourself," retorted Cecil, softly. "You said, 'I am as free as a king—as yet.'"

"Did I?" said Laurence, curtly.

"Yes," said Cecil. "What did you mean, Laury? Do tell me."

Laurence paused in what he was doing to the horses and turned to Cecil, resting his arm on the black's neck and speaking almost to himself as he fixed his eyes on the boy's handsome face.

"Cecil, boy, you are inquisitive. A month ago, lad, and I should have given you a sharp answer; but—but—well, Cecil, I can not tell the why or wherefore, but my heart has softened to you—to you only, mind—and I feel as I would rather not feel, for Laurence Harman can hope for no friendship with man or boy while his heart is as heavy as it is. Lad, tell me by what sorcery you have made me like you?"

He broke off with a sudden smile, that was like a flash of sunshine across his face notwithstanding its half-regretful sadness.

Cecil rose and walked to his horse, standing with his face turned away.

"I don't know," he replied, with a hesitating softness "except it is I like you, Laury. You have been kind to me, you know."

Laurence shook his head.

"It isn't that, boy," he said. "I can not discover the secret spell that links

us in my heart; but when I am lying in the hut yonder, solitary and silent, and the wolves are howling across the watch-fire, I think of you and wish I had you with me. Cecil, they say, down in the village where I was born, that if kin meets kin unawares the heart will find its own. I am thinking"—and he smiled with a kindly mockery—"I'm thinking we must be kith and kin, or my heart is playing the old dame's proverb false."

Cecil turned his pale face—it had grown pale and moved with strong emotion.

"We are not kith and kin," he said, brokenly. "We are but friends, Laury."

"Ay, that is it," said Laurence, with a sigh, and rousing himself he went and fastened the hut door. "That is it, Cecil, we are friends," and he held out his hand.

It was a strange, remarkable thing for Wild Laury to do, and the youth seemed almost too surprised to grasp it. However, with a slight blush, he took the big, brown hand and tried to squeeze it in his little palm.

Laurence smiled.

"It is long since this hand of mine has pressed another," he said, grimly, and added: "And never such a little one as yours, lad."

Then they rode on, and Laurence, settling himself into his saddle, fell into a deep gloom, his face relaxing into its old gloom and reserve.

CHAPTER XX.  
A STRUGGLE FOR DEAR LIFE.

The blood more stirs  
To rouse a lion than to start a hare.

—HENRY IV.

Antelopes were scarce and of other game there seemed none, though Laurence often bent low in his saddle to discover indications of the tracks of wild animals.

He never made any remark after these examinations, and Cecil, on whom a silence as deep and unbroken as Laurence's own had fallen, did not question him.

They rode on as quickly and noiselessly as they could through the tangled forest until noon had passed.

Then suddenly Cecil uttered a low cry, and Laurence, looking round, saw that he had gone pale and seemed about to fall from the horse.

He dismounted at once and caught him.

"What is the matter, Cecil?" he asked; but for the moment Cecil could not answer.

Presently, however, he opened his eyes and smiling, not very bravely, said:

"I—don't know. I felt giddy, and—and—I think I fainted."

"Ay," said Laurence, whose brows were knit with anxious self-reproach. "You have ridden too far, poor lad. Your good looks misled me."

"No, no!" exclaimed Cecil, eagerly. "No, no, Laury, I am not tired; the ride has not been too long—may, all too short! The hot sun has made me faint. Oh, don't look so sad and self-reproachful—it's no one's fault but my own! There, there, I am all right again!" and, with a laugh, he made a movement toward the horse.

But Laurence shook his head.

"You can not mount yet, Cecil; you are weaker than you think. Your face is quite pale and your hand is cold—yes, like ice. You must sit down here upon the bank while I go for some water; there should be a stream here."

"Will not brandy do as well?" asked Cecil, with a very unmanly nervousness at the idea of being left alone in the huge forest.

Laurence shook his head. He had a suspicion that the handsome, winsome boy who had crept into his heart had caught the native fever. If so, brandy would be fatal.

"No," he said, "brandy would do you no good. You must wait here till I return. I will not be a minute. Come, lad, I'm loath to leave you, but I must get water for you."

Cecil tried to look cheerful. Laurence brought the gun and laid it at his side.

"See," he said; "here's the nasty gun. You won't want it, but it will help to keep that quick-silver courage up, lad, till I come back."

He spoke cheerfully, almost banteringly; but, as he said, he was loath to leave the youth, and as he sprang into the thicket with his horn cup in his hand he stopped to look round.

Cecil, who seemed to read the look, called up an encouraging smile, and Laurence disappeared.

The stream he had expected to find lay a little to the right, and he had to fight his way through the dense un-

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dergrowth to it—a matter of hard work and no little time.

However, water he must have, for he feared that Cecil would faint again.

Cecil leaned his head against the tree and closed his eyes. The faintness had gone, but he felt nervous and giddy.

His bright, rosy looks had been, as Laurence had self-accusingly said, deceptive. He was not so strong as he looked, and the excitement of the antelope-chase, added to the long ride, had overcome him.

Still as he sat thus, half dreaming, his brain was going over Laurence's confession word for word.

"We are friends—we should be kith and kin" brought a soft, sweet pleasure to Cecil, a pleasure that sent the color back to the face again and set his heart beating.

"We are friends—poor Laury!" murmured Cecil, and added, with a naive sigh that would have puzzled Laurence had he heard it and seen the accompanying look, "poor Cecil!"

Laurence was gone longer than Cecil had expected him to be, and feeling better, he was anxious for his return.

The sudden faintness had gone, and he was about to raise his voice to cry out when a sudden rustling in the bushes behind him struck him dumb and brought him sharp round.

What he saw there turned his heart to stone and his face to the color of marble: two great, blazing eyes were fixed on his with a blood-thirsty ferocity.

For a second—that seemed an age—Cecil stood glued to the spot, staring at the fearful spots of fire.

Then, as the heart seemed to beat again, he opened his lips and, uttering one piercing cry, turned and fled.

The next moment the animal sprang from the bushes with an answering growl, and would have been upon the lad's back; but at that instant Laurence sprang from the brush at the side and received the brute full upon his chest.

Man and beast went down like lead, and then ensued a struggle for life.

Laurence had drawn his bow knife as the shriek had pierced his ear.

The panther, however, had got his arm down and was clawing at his bare breast.

With the blood streaming from his forehead, which the brute had scraped, and half blinding him, Laurence fought madly to get the arm released, and at last managed to swing the long, shining blade and drive it up to the hilt in the throat of the animal.

With one last growl it shook its spotted head and fell ever dead!

Laurence crawled to his feet, wiped the blood from his face, and called faintly for Cecil.

No answer came, and, struck to the heart with the chill of a fearful dread that the panther had perhaps attacked the youth before he sprang forward, and calling and shouting, he beat the bush like a madman.

Then he heard a frightened moan, and, springing to the spot whence it proceeded, saw the girlish figure of the youth crouching at the foot of a tree.

Laurence knelt down and called his my name, still wiping the blood from his face; but the lad seemed half senseless with fright.

(To be Continued.)

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