

# The Man from South Africa

*A Story of How the Heroine Circumvented the Villain*

By DAVID LYALL

"It seems hard," observed the vicar, thoughtfully. "But is it any use to intervene? The thing was inevitable, and, of course, the squire is quite within his rights."

"Undoubtedly," said his wife, with a touch of acerbity in her prim voice; "and it is foolish of the Holts to make such a fuss about it. But that's just like them. They've been troublesome people ever since we came to Gravelly Hill."

"I wouldn't exactly say that, my dear," observed the vicar with his customary mildness. "They are superior people, perhaps that has been the difficulty all along. Had they been more like the Brookes at Bottom End there would have been no trouble about buying them out."

"We don't want superior people in a village inn, Clement," replied Mrs. Clitheroe; "but somebody who knows which side their bread is buttered on. I'm sick enough of the airs the Holts have given themselves for a long time. And they're too fond of making laws for themselves. An inn is a place of public entertainment, as far as I know anything about it, but they have brought too many of their own fads into the management of the 'Bun and Stoa'."

"It's Emily," said the vicar. "She's a fine woman, but takes a restricted view. What is it, Puss; why do you stare so solemnly with those big eyes of yours?" he added, turning to his daughter Mabel, otherwise Puss, the apple of his eye, and the pride of the parish.

"I think, Daddy, that it's awful of the new squire to want to turn out the dear Holts. And if it's true that he will pull down the 'Bun and Stoa' and build a big horrid red public-house in its place, I don't wonder that everybody is angry."

The vicar was well accustomed to frank expression of opinion on Mabel's part, and usually laughed at her for it; but this time he felt bound to reprove her.

"It is in the interests of the place, Puss, and we musn't judge a man for doing his best with his own. There are a good many things an up-to-date squire, a business man from South Africa, would naturally want to change in Gravelly Hill. We may be quite picturesque, my dear, but we are rather out-of-date and, I fear, insanitary."

"Perhaps he'll want to pull down the church and the vicarage, and build new red brick ones too," observed the maiden demurely.

The vicar's face reddened a little.

"Not at all, not at all; he would never dream of such a thing. Gravelly Church is one of the finest examples—"

"Oh spare us, Clement!" observed his wife, holding up a deprecating hand. "We don't want the contents of the guide book, and we all know perfectly well that the church is cold and draughty and damp and everything it ought not to be. For my part I shouldn't mind if it were pulled down, or at least renovated. And I shall welcome Mr. Pegram's arrival at Gravelly as the inauguration of a new era."

"It is an unfortunate name, Christopher Pegram," said Mabel mischievously. "Nobody could expect heroic deeds from a man labouring under such a natural disadvantage."

The church of Gravelly Hill stood on the very summit of the hill which gave its name to the parish, and was a landmark for miles around, its square Norman tower with the old ivy creeping round it being known of travellers far and near. It was only one degree less familiar, perhaps, than the "Bun and Stoa," the quaint old hostel standing in its open courtyard under the branching elms, where there was a draw well, and old wooden benches where travellers might rest.

Mabel could just see the waving tops of the elms where they glinted yellow in the ruddy October sun, and a sudden indignation shook her. She clenched her small fist and tossed her red gold hair in the wind, and set off at a small canter down the hill. She was just seventeen, a winsome creature, with no idea of growing up, though her mother had long hinted at lengthened skirts and hair demurely knotted up behind. Mabel had begged that she might remain not grown-up, as she expressed it, until Christmas which was now within measurable distance. Only that morning she had counted out seven weeks and five days.

It was a quarter of a mile from the church and vicarage to the village, and almost another quarter to the "Bun and Stoa," which had been built in the old days, for reasons that never had been explained, at the very gates of Gravelly Hall, where the Lord

of the Manor dwelt. For forty years he had been a gentle old man who had lived the life of a recluse, and interfered with none. Perhaps such a slack rule had caused them all to get exaggerated ideas about their own rights and liberties, and that any change must have tried them sorely. But it seemed such a drastic change. Old Christopher Pegram had left, as his sole heir and executor, the son of an old friend who had emigrated to South Africa in his youth, on condition that he took his name. Such was the story, but the real inwardness was not known save by the man who had benefited under the will.

It was by no means an uncommon story. Two men who had been friends in youth had loved the same woman, and the one had remained unmarried for her sake.

Mabel Clitheroe knew nothing about this story, which would have quickly appealed to her warm imagination. She was by no means pleased at the idea of "the man from South Africa," as she called him, coming in and destroying all the old-world features of the village. She thought it still worse, and more reprehensible for him to give orders for drastic changes to be made without so much as troubling to come down and see the place for himself. She supposed that he was still in South Africa, winding up his affairs, and South Africa was too far away to give her a chance to speak her mind. Mabel had decided long since that some day she would speak her mind to the new squire, for she loved the old inn and the folk who lived in it, in fact her increasing intimacy with the Holts was a serious thorn in the flesh of her mother, who did not like the Holts, and constantly maintained that they held ideas above their station.

Mrs. Clitheroe belonged to the class of meddling persons who wished to manage everybody's affairs and to patronise the whole of her husband's parish, where she was cordially disliked. And it was because the Holts, during all the years she had been in Gravelly, had persistently resented her interference with the management of the "Bun and Stoa," and had successfully kept her on the outside of their affairs, that she bore them such a grudge.

Mabel had no hat on, and she arrived under the elms at the old inn with her hair blowing in the wind, and a colour more radiant and lovely than the peach bloom on her smooth cheek. She was a beautiful creature, and all her charm was enhanced by her utter and superb unconsciousness. Moreover she was the idol, not of Gravelly alone, but of every nook of the scattered parish she was wont to scour on foot and on the back of her shaggy Shetland. Nowhere was the vicar's daughter more idolised than at the old inn.

Emily Holt, the daughter of the inn-keeper, who was sitting with a bit of needlework just within the porch, sprang up when she saw her come, and sallied forth to meet her. Emily was a striking-looking woman of about thirty-five, tall, well-proportioned, graceful, with dark hair and warm, clear colouring. There was a stand-offishness in her manner which at once repelled and attracted people.

"Won't stand no nonsense, Emily Holt," was a form of remark often made about her; on the other hand she was a staunch friend, a generous and kindly neighbour, and a good woman, not the sort of woman one expected to meet in a village inn; but many chance visitors who had stayed there, came and came again, finding something rare in the atmosphere, and some quality in the entertainment which gave their country holiday a special flavour. There was no roughness, no drinking or late hours permitted at the "Bun and Stoa"; it was rather a family house, a place of quiet entertainment for man and beast.

"Dearest Emily," said Mabel, holding up her face to be kissed, "has anything else happened? They were talking about it at home, and I thought I'd come down and see."

"Come and sit in the porch with me. Father is lying down, and I haven't told him, but there's been another letter from Mr. Pulteney, and he gives us just three weeks."

"Three weeks for what?"

"To clear out," said Emily in a voice of quiet bitterness.

"And what are you going to do?" inquired Mabel in intense excitement.

"I put the letter in the fire and took no notice."

"But, Emily, that won't do, I'm sure. Pulteney must have an answer of some kind."

"He won't expect it; I guess he knows I put that letter in the fire, and that father never even saw it," she replied in exactly the same even, bitter voice.

"Will they try to put you out, do you think?"

"I have no doubt whatever about it," said Emily quietly. "But until they do put us out, we don't move. If only the squire would come down here, something might be done, but Pulteney is keeping him away!"

"But he's in South Africa still, isn't he?" inquired Mabel eagerly.

"Some say not; that he's in London. At least he won't be long in coming now. Pulteney's aim, don't you see, is to get us out before he comes. I suppose he's afraid that when he does come, the squire may not be such a puppet as he is now. It's wicked, I say, for a man to give such power into the hands of unscrupulous persons. He would have been just the same in the old squire's time, only he wasn't permitted to be hard on people."

"He looks quite amiable, and he always is amiable when I see him," said Mabel. "I can't make out why he is so abominable to you, darling Emily."

"Pulteney is a hard man, dear, but he is not so hard on everybody as he is on me."

"But why, Emily?"

"Well, you see, once upon a time he used to come here a lot, and we were very good friends."

"And did you quarrel?" Mabel asked breathlessly.

"Yes, and no, dear. You are too young to explain it to yet. Some day I will tell you. That was eleven years ago, and he has persecuted me ever since. We haven't been able to get a single thing done, and we always knew that when the squire died he would try to put us out. But we won't go unless they put us out by main force."

"It's awful, Emily, perfectly scandalous and awful!" cried Mabel, who like all strong natures liked strong words, and required them to express her inward thoughts.

"We will stop here at least until the squire himself puts us out. Pulteney has made some tale to him that has no truth in it, and we have all the people on our side. If only he would come home himself, and see how matters are, well, I am sure if he is a generous man, or even a just one, at least a half of Pulteney's programme, which he calls reforms, would never be carried out."

"If I knew his address I would write to him," said Mabel impulsively.

"He has left Africa, and somebody calling here from London said he would stop at the Hotel Cecil, that he was expected there."

"I will remember that, but I will write it down," said Mabel, scribbling the name in the little old diary that hung at her side.

She did not think it wise to repeat, even to her father, any part of what had passed between her and Emily Holt, but she continued to ponder it in her mind. One morning, about a fortnight later, looking out of the window she saw Pulteney, the squire's man of affairs, tethering his horse's bridle to the gate post. Her father was in the garden, and Mabel went out by the open French window and began to appear very interested in his pruning of the rose trees.

"Good morning, vicar, how is the world using you? Good morning, Miss Mabel, you grow prettier every day. Upon my word you do. You'll be making a few of them sit up one of these days. You'll have to put her in a cage, vicar."

The vicar merely smiled. To him the child would never grow up.

"I'm very well, Mr. Pulteney. How's matters going? Any word of the squire getting back for Christmas?"

"He may just manage it. The 'Walmer Castle' is expected off Southampton on the twenty-third. I may go down to meet him if I get word in time. If not I shall certainly meet the boat train at Waterloo."

Mabel made a mental note of all these details, but did not deem it wise to put them down openly in the old red diary.

"And what about the 'Bun and Stoa'? I called there yesterday. Miss Holt seems as determined to stop as you are to get her out. Won't you wait now until Mr. Pegram returns?"

Pulteney's mouth took the long hard line which Mabel specially hated.

"They'll go out right enough, vicar, if it takes the police to do it. I'll get into hot water, as it is, for not having things more forward. The inn's in a state of dilapidation, and the squire may quite