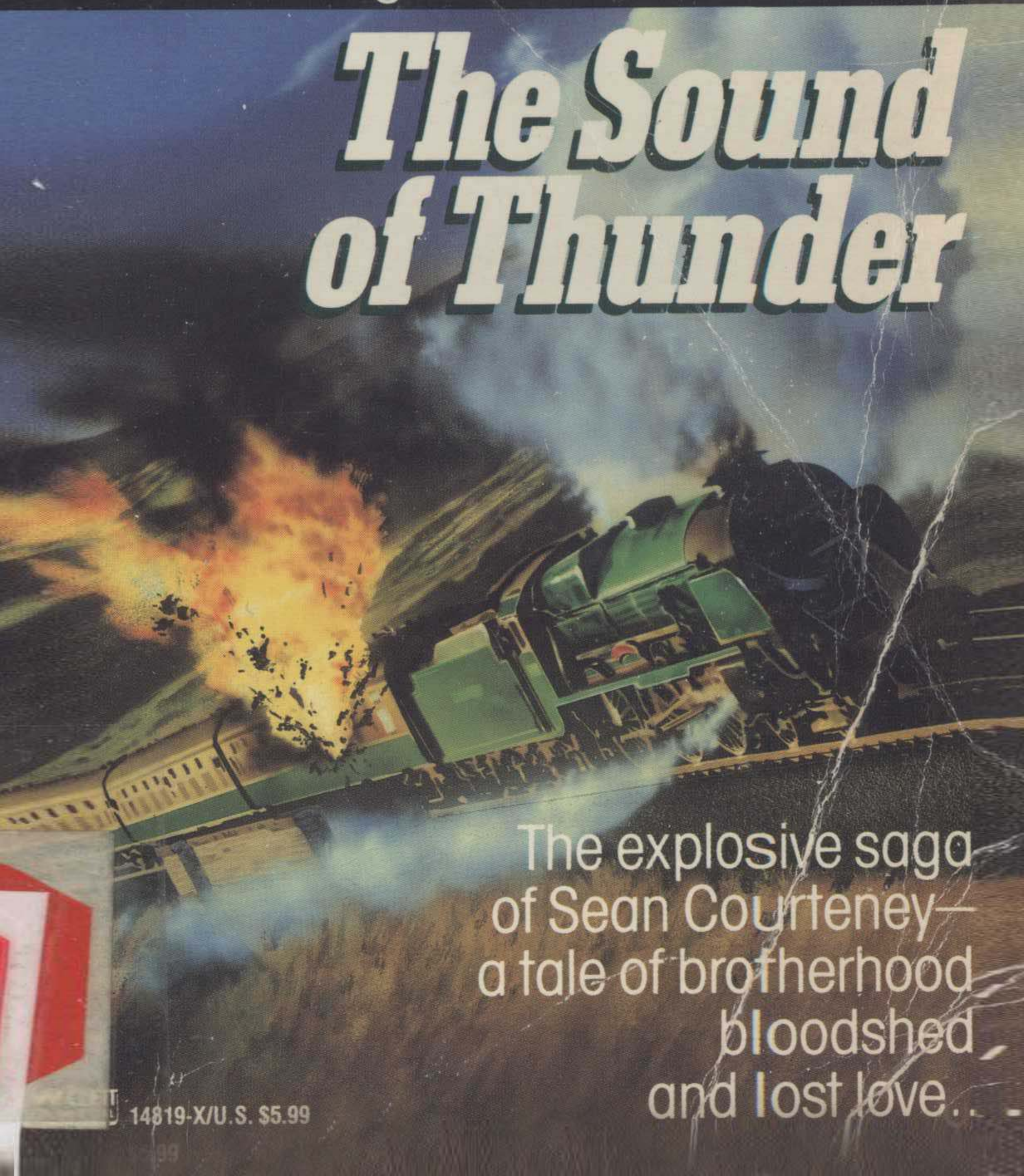


WILBUR SMITH

Bestselling author of A TIME TO DIE

The Sound of Thunder



The explosive saga
of Sean Courteney—
a tale of brotherhood
bloodshed
and lost love...

THE SOUND OF THUNDER

Wilbur Smith

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL • NEW YORK

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There was no coherence in Sean's thoughts, the only pattern was the rise and swoop of alternate anger and despair.

Anger at the woman, anger almost becoming hatred before the plunge of despair as he remembered she was gone. Then anger building up towards madness, this time directed at himself for letting her go. Again the sickening drop as he realized that there was no means by which he could have held her.

Once more his anger flared. A week ago he had been rich—and his anger found a new target. There was at least somewhere he could seek vengeance, there was a tangible enemy to strike, to kill. The Boer. The Boer had robbed him of his wagons and his gold, had sent him scurrying for safety; because of them the woman had come into his life and because of them she had been snatched away from him.

So be it, he thought angrily, this then is the promise of the future. War!

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WILD JUSTICE**

**Published by Fawcett Books*

**This book is for my children—
SHAUN and LAWRENCE and CHRISTIAN LAURIE**

--- --- 1 --- ---

Four years of travel in the roadless wilderness had battered the wagons. Many of the wheel-spokes and *disselbooms* had been replaced with raw native timber; the canopies were patched until little of the original canvas was visible; the teams were reduced from eighteen to ten oxen each, for there had been predators and sickness to weed them out. But this exhausted little caravan carried the teeth of five hundred elephant; ten tons of ivory; the harvest of Sean Courteney's rifle; ivory that he would convert into nearly fifteen thousand gold sovereigns once he reached Pretoria.

Once more Sean was a rich man. His clothing was stained and baggy, crudely mended; his boots were worn almost through the uppers and clumsily resoled with raw buffalo hide; a great untrimmed beard covered half his chest and a mane of black hair curled down his neck to where it had been hacked away with blunt scissors above the collar of his coat. But despite his appearance he was rich in ivory, also in gold held for him in the vaults of the Volkskaas Bank in Pretoria.

On a rise of ground beside the road he sat his horse and watched the leisurely plodding approach of his wagons. It is time now for the farm, he thought with satisfaction. Thirty-seven years old, no longer a young man, and it was time to buy the farm. He knew the one he wanted and he knew exactly where he would build the homestead—site it close to the lip of the escarpment so that in the evenings he could sit on the wide stoep look out across the plain to the Tugela River in the blue distance.

"Tomorrow early we will reach Pretoria." The voice beside him interrupted his dreaming, and Sean moved in the saddle and looked down at the Zulu who squatted beside his horse.

"It has been a good hunt, Mbejane."

"Nkosi, we have killed many elephant." Mbejane nodded

and Sean noticed for the first time the strands of silver in the wooly cap of his hair. No longer a young man either.

“And made many marches,” Sean went on and Mbejane inclined his head again in grave agreement.

“A man grows weary of the trek,” Sean mused aloud. “There is a time when he longs to sleep two nights at the same place.”

“And to hear the singing of his wives as they work the fields.” Mbejane carried it further. “And to watch his cattle come into the kraal at dusk with his sons driving them.”

“That time has come for both of us, my friend. We are going home to Ladyburg.”

The spears rattled against his raw-hide shield as Mbejane stood up, muscles moved beneath the black velvet of his skin and he lifted his head to Sean and smiled. It was a thing of white teeth and radiance, that smile. Sean had to return it and they grinned at each other like two small boys in a successful bit of mischief.

“If we push the oxen hard this last day we can reach Pretoria tonight, Nkosi.”

“Let us make the attempt.” Sean encouraged him and walked his horse down the slope to intercept the caravan.

As it toiled slowly towards them through the flat white glare of the African morning a commotion started at its rear and spread quickly along the line, the dogs clamoured and the servants shouted encouragement to the rider who raced past them towards the head of the caravan. He lay forward in the saddle, driving the pony with elbows and heels, hat hanging from the leather thong about his neck and black hair ruffled with the speed of his run.

“That cub roars louder than the lion that sired him,” grunted Mbejane, but there was a fondness in his expression as he watched the rider reach the leading wagon and drag the pony from full run down on to his haunches.

“Also he spoils the mouth of every horse he rides.” Sean’s voice was as harsh as Mbejane’s, but there was the same fond expression in his eyes as he watched his son cut loose the brown body of a springbok from the pommel of his saddle and let it drop into the road beside the wagon. Two of the wagon drivers hurried to retrieve it, and Dirk Courteney kicked his pony and galloped down to where Sean and Mbejane waited beside the road.

“Only one?” Sean asked as Dirk checked the pony and circled back to fall in beside him.

“Oh, no. I got three—three with three shots. The gunboys are bringing the others.” Offhanded, taking as natural that at nine years of age he should be providing meat for the whole company, Dirk slouched down comfortably in the saddle, holding the reins in one hand and the other resting negligently on his hip in faithful imitation of his father.

Scowling a little to cover the strength of his pride and his love, Sean examined him surreptitiously. The beauty of this boy’s face was almost indecent, the innocence of the eyes and faultless skin should have belonged to a girl. The sun struck ruby sparks from the mass of dark curls, his eyes spaced wide apart were framed with long black lashes and overscored by the delicate lines of the brow. His eyes were emerald and his skin was gold and there were rubies in his hair—a face fashioned by a jeweler-smith. Then Sean looked at the mouth and experienced a twinge of uneasiness. The mouth was too big, the lips too wide and soft. The shape of it was wrong—as though it were about to sulk or whine.

“We are making a full day’s trek today, Dirk. No *outspan* until we reach Pretoria. Ride back and tell the drivers.”

“Send Mbejane. He’s doing nothing.”

“I told *you* to go.”

“Hell, Dad! I’ve done enough today.”

“Go, damn you!” Sean roared with unnecessary violence.

“I’ve only just come back, it’s not fair that—” Dirk started, but Sean did not let him finish.

“Every time I ask you to do something I get a mouthful of argument. Now do what I tell you.” They held each other’s eyes; Sean glaring and Dirk resentful, sulky. Sean recognized that expression with dismay. This was going to be another of those tests of will that were becoming more frequent between them. Would this end as most of the others had? Must he admit defeat and use the *sjambok* again? When was the last time—two weeks ago—when Sean had reprimanded Dirk on some trivial point concerning the care of his pony. Dirk had stood sullenly until Sean was finished, and then he had walked away among the wagons. Dropping the subject from his mind, Sean was chatting with Mbejane when suddenly there was a squeal of pain from the laager and Sean ran towards it.

In the centre of the ring of wagons stood Dirk. His face was

still darkly flushed with temper, and at his feet the tiny body of one of the unweaned puppies flopped and whimpered with its ribs stoved in from Dirk's kick.

In anger Sean had beaten Dirk, but even in his anger he had used a length of rope and not the viciously tapered *sjambok* of hippo hide. Then he had ordered Dirk to his living-wagon.

At noon he had sent for him and demanded an apology—and Dirk, uncrying, with lips and jaw set grimly, had refused it.

Sean beat him again, with the rope, but this time coldly—not for the sake of retribution. Dirk did not break.

Finally, in desperation Sean took the *sjambok* to him. For ten hissing strokes, each of which ended with a wicked snap across his buttocks, Dirk lay silently under the whip. His body convulsed slightly at each lash but he would not speak, and Sean beat him with a sickness in his own stomach, and the sweat of shame and guilt running into his eyes, swinging the *sjambok* mechanically with his fingers clawed around the butt of it, and his mouth full of the slimy saliva of self-hatred.

When at last Dirk screamed, Sean dropped the *sjambok*, reeled back against the side of the wagon and leaned there gasping—fighting down the nausea which flooded acid-tasting up his throat.

Dirk screamed again and again, and Sean caught him up and held him to his chest.

“I’m sorry, Pa! I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again, I promise you. I love you, I love you best of all—and I’ll never do it again,” screamed Dirk, and they clung to each other.

For days thereafter not one of the servants had smiled at Sean nor spoken to him other than to acknowledge an order. For there was not one of them, including Mbejane, who would not steal and cheat and lie to ensure that Dirk Courteney had whatever he desired at the exact moment he desired it. They could hate anyone, including Sean, who denied it to him.

That was two weeks ago. And now, thought Sean watching that ugly mouth, do we do it all again?

Then suddenly Dirk smiled. It was one of those changes of mood that left Sean slightly bewildered, for when Dirk smiled his mouth came right. It was irresistible.

“I’ll go, Dad.” Cheerfully, as though he were volunteering, he prodded the pony and trotted back towards the wagons.

“Cheeky little bugger!” gruffed Sean for Mbejane’s benefit, but silently he queried his share of the blame. He had raised the

boy with a wagon as his home and the veld as his schoolroom, grown men his companions and authority over them as his undisputed right of birth.

Since his mother had died five years before he had not known the gentling influence of a woman. No wonder he was a wild one.

Sean shied away from the memory of Dirk's mother. There was guilt there also, guilt that had taken him many years to reconcile. She was dead now. There was no profit in torturing himself. He pushed away the gloom that was swamping the happiness of a few minutes before, slapped the loose end of the reins against his horse's neck and urged it out on to the road—south towards the low line of hills upon the horizon, south towards Pretoria.

He's a wild one. But once we reach Ladyburg he'll be all right, Sean assured himself. They'll knock the nonsense out of him at school, and I'll knock manners into him at home. No, he'll be all right.

That evening, the third of December, 1899, Sean led his wagons down the hills and laagered them beside the Apies River. After they had eaten, Sean sent Dirk to his cot in the living-wagon. Then he climbed alone to the crest of the hills and looked back across the land to the north. It was silver-grey in the moonlight, stretching away silent and immeasurable. That was the old life and abruptly he turned his back upon it and walked down towards the lights of the city which beckoned to him from the valley below.

== 2 ==

There had been a little unpleasantness when he had ordered Dirk to stay with the wagons; in consequence Sean was in an evil mood as he crossed the bridge on the Apies and rode into the

city the following morning. Beside him Mbejane ran to keep pace with his horse.

Deep in his own thoughts Sean turned into Church Street before he noticed the unusual activity about him. A column of horsemen forced him to rein his horse to the side of the road. As they passed Sean examined them with interest.

Burghers in a motley of homespun and store clothes, riding in a formation which might imaginatively have been called a column of fours. But what excited Sean's curiosity was their numbers—By God! there must be two thousand of them at least, from lads to greybeards each of them was festooned with bandoliers of ammunition and beside each left knee the butt of a bolt-action Mauser rifle stuck up from its scabbard. Blanket-rolls tied to the saddles, canteens and cooking-pots clattering, they filed past. There was no doubting it. This was a war commando.

From the sidewalk women and a few men called comment at them.

“*Geluk hoor!* Shoot straight.”

“*Spoedige terugkoms.*”

And the commandos laughed and shouted back. Sean stooped to a pretty girl who stood beside his horse. She was waving a red scarf and suddenly Sean saw that though she smiled her eyelashes were loaded with tears like dew on a blade of grass.

“Where are they going?” Sean raised his voice above the uproar. She lifted her head and the movement loosed a tear; it dropped down her cheek, slid from her chin and left a tiny damp spot on her blouse.

“To the train, of course.”

“The train? Which train?”

“Look, here come the guns.”

In consternation Sean looked up as the guns rumbled past, two of them. Uniformed gunners in blue, frogged with gold, sitting stiffly to attention on the carriages, the horses leaning forward against the immense weight of the guns. Tall wheels shod with steel, bronze glittering on the breeches in contrast to the sombre grey of the barrels.

“My God!” breathed Sean. Then turning back to the girl he grasped her shoulder and shook it in his agitation. “Where are they going? Tell me quickly—where?”

“*Menheer!*” She bridled at his touch and wriggled away from it.

“Please. I’m sorry—you must tell me.” Sean called after her as she disappeared into the crowd.

A minute longer Sean sat stupefied, then his brain began to work again.

It was war, then. But where and against whom?

Surely no tribal rising would call out this array of strength. Those guns were the most modern weapons Sean could conceive.

No, this was a white man’s war.

Against the Orange Republic? Impossible, they were brothers.

Against the British, then? The idea appalled him. And yet—and yet five years ago there had been rumours. It had happened before. He remembered 1895, and the Jameson Raid. Anything could have happened during the years he had been cut off from civilization—and now he had stumbled innocently into the midst of it.

Quickly he considered his own position. He was British. Born in Natal under the Union Jack. He looked like a burgher, spoke like one, rode like one, he was born in Africa and had never left it—but technically he was just as much an Englishman as if he had been born within sound of Bow bells.

Just supposing it was war between the Republic and Britain, and just supposing the Boers caught him—what would they do with him?

Confiscate his wagons and his ivory certainly, throw him into prison perhaps, shoot him as a spy possibly!

“I’ve got to get to hell out of here,” he mumbled, and then to Mbejane, “Come on. Back to the wagons, quickly.” Before they reached the bridge he changed his mind. He had to learn with certainty what was happening. There was one person he could go to, and he must take the risk.

“Mbejane, go back to the camp. Find Nkosizana Dirk and keep him there—even if you have to tie him. Speak to no man and, as you value your life, let Dirk speak with no man. It is understood?”

“It is understood, Nkosi.”

And Sean, to all appearances another burgher among thousands of burghers, worked his way slowly through the crowds and the press of wagons towards a general dealer’s store at the top end of the town near the railway station.

Since Sean had last seen it the sign above the entrance had

been freshly painted in red and gold. "I. Goldberg. Importer & Exporter, Dealing in Mining Machinery, Merchant & Wholesaler, Purchasing Agent: gold, precious stones, hides and skins, ivory and natural produce."

Despite this war, or because of it, Mr. Goldberg's emporium was doing good business. It was crowded and Sean drifted unnoticed among the customers, searching quietly for the proprietor.

He found him selling a bag of coffee beans to a gentleman who was plainly sceptical of its quality. The discussion of the merits of Mr. Goldberg's coffee beans as opposed to those of his competitor across the street was becoming involved and technical.

Sean leaned against a shelf full of merchandise, packed his pipe, lit it and while he waited he watched Mr. Goldberg in action. The man should have been a barrister, his argument was strong enough to convince first Sean and finally the customer. The latter paid, slung the bag over his shoulder and grumbled his way out of the shop, leaving Mr. Goldberg glowing pink and perspiring in the flush of achievement.

"You haven't lost any weight, Izzy," Sean greeted him.

Goldberg peered at him uncertainly over his gold-framed spectacles, beginning to smile until suddenly he recognized Sean. He blinked with shock, jerked his head in a gesture of invitation so his jowls wobbled, and disappeared into the back office. Sean followed him.

"Are you mad, Mr. Courteney?" Goldberg was waiting for him, quivering with agitation. "If they catch you . . ."

"Listen Izzy. I arrived last night. I haven't spoken to a white man in four years. What the hell is going on here?"

"You haven't heard?"

"No, damn it, I haven't."

"It's war, Mr. Courteney."

"I can see that. But where? Against whom?"

"On all the borders—Natal, the Cape."

"Against?"

"The British Empire." Goldberg shook his head as though he did not believe his own statement. "We've taken on the whole British Empire."

"We?" Sean asked sharply.

"The Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. Already

we have won great victories—Ladysmith is besieged, Kimberley, Mafeking—”

“You, personally?”

“I was born here in Pretoria. I am a burgher.”

“Are you going to turn me in?”

“No, of course not. You’ve been a good customer of mine for years.”

“Thanks, Izzy. Look, I’ve got to get out of here as fast as I can.”

“It would be wise.”

“What about my money at the Volkskaas—can I get it out?”

Izzy shook his head sadly. “They’ve frozen all enemy accounts.”

“Damn it, God damn it!” Sean swore bitterly, and then, “Izzy, I’ve got twenty wagons and ten tons of ivory parked out there on the edge of town—are you interested?”

“How much?”

“Ten thousand for the lot; oxen, wagons, ivory—the lot.”

“It would not be patriotic, Mr. Courteney,” Goldberg decided reluctantly. “Trading with the enemy—besides I have only your word that it’s ten tons.”

“Hell, Izzy, I’m not the British Army—that lot is worth twenty thousand quid.”

“You want me to buy sight unseen—no questions asked? All right. I’ll give you four thousand—gold.”

“Seven.”

“Four and a half,” countered Izzy.

“You bastard.”

“Four and a half.”

“No, damn you. Five!” growled Sean.

“Five?”

“Five!”

“All right, five.”

“Thanks, Izzy.”

“Pleasure, Mr. Courteney.”

Sean described the location of his laager hurriedly.

“You can send someone out to pick it up. I am going to run for the Natal border as soon as it’s dark.”

“Keep off the roads and well clear of the railway. Joubert has thirty thousand men in Northern Natal, massed around Ladysmith and along the Tugela heights.” Goldberg went to the safe

and fetched five small canvas bags from it. "Do you want to check?"

"I'll trust you as you trusted me. Good-bye, Izzy." Sean dropped the heavy bags down the front of his shirt and settled them under his belt.

"Good luck, Mr. Courteney."

3

There were two hours of daylight left when Sean finished paying his servants. He pushed the tiny pile of sovereigns across the tailboard of the wagon towards the last man and went with him through the complicated ritual of farewell, the hand-clapping and clasping, the repetition of the formal phrases—then he stood up from his chair and looked around the circle. They squatted patiently, watching him with wooden black faces—but reflected back from them he could sense his own sorrow at this parting. Men with whom he had lived and worked and shared a hundred hardships. It was not easy to leave them now.

"It is finished," he said.

"*Yebho*, it is finished." They agreed in chorus and no one moved.

"Go, damn you."

Slowly one of them stood and gathered the bundle of his possessions, a *kaross* (or skin blanket), two spears, a cast-off shirt that Sean had given him. He balanced the bundle on his head and looked at Sean.

"Nkosi!" he said and lifted a clenched fist in salute.

"Nonga," Sean replied. The man turned away and trudged out of the laager.

"Nkosi!"

"Hlubi."

"Nkosi!"

"Zama."

A roll call of loyalty—Sean spoke their names for the last time, and singly they left the laager. Sean stood and watched them walk away in the dusk. Not one of them looked back and no two men walked together. It was finished.

Wearily Sean turned back to the laager. The horses were ready. Three with saddles, two carrying packs.

“We will eat first, Mbejane.”

“It is ready, Nkosi. Hlubi cooked before he went.”

“Come on, Dirk. Dinner.”

Dirk was the only one who spoke during the meal. He chattered gaily, wrought up with excitement by this new adventure, while Sean and Mbejane shovelled fat Hlubi's stew and hardly tasted it.

Out in the gathering darkness a jackal yelped, a lonely sound on the evening wind, fitting the mood of a man who had lost friends and fortune.

“It is time.” Sean shrugged into his sheepskin jacket and buttoned it as he stood to kick out the fire, but suddenly he froze and stood with his head cocked as he listened. There was a new sound on the wind.

“Horses!” Mbejane confirmed it.

“Quickly, Mbejane, my rifle.” The Zulu leapt up, ran to the horses and slipped Sean's rifle from its scabbard.

“Get out of the light and keep your mouth shut,” Sean ordered as he hustled Dirk into the shadows between the wagons. He grabbed the rifle from Mbejane and levered a cartridge into the breech and the three of them crouched and waited.

The click and roll of pebbles under hooves, the soft sound of a branch brushed aside.

“One only,” whispered Mbejane. A pack-horse whickered softly and was answered immediately from the darkness. Then silence, a long silence broken at last by the jingle of a bridle as the rider dismounted.

Sean saw him then, a slim figure emerging slowly out of the night and he swung the rifle to cover his approach. There was something unusual in the way the stranger moved, gracefully but with a sway from the hips, long-legged like a colt and Sean knew that he was young, very young to judge by his height.

With relief Sean straightened up from his crouch and examined him as he stopped uncertainly beside the fire and peered into the shadows. The lad wore a peaked cloth cap pulled down over his ears and his jacket was an expensive, honey-coloured